

Stefan Svallfors

Knowing the game: motivation and skills among policy professionals

This paper focuses on “policy professionals”, i.e. people who are employed to affect politics and policy, and analyzes their particular motivations and skills. The paper focuses on the occupational practices of policy professionals: what are their main motivations and driving forces, and what are the key resources they deploy in their work? The main motivation for policy professionals is a desire to wield power and influence the course of affairs, while their working-life satisfaction comes from getting their message into the media without becoming personally exposed. The key resource of policy professionals is context-dependent politically useful knowledge, in three main forms: “Problem formulation” involves highlighting and framing social problems and their possible solutions. “Process expertise” consists of understanding the “where, how and why” of the political and policy-making processes. “Information access” is the skill to be very fast in finding reliable and relevant information. These motivations and skills underpin a particular professionalism based in an “entrepreneurial ethos”, which differs from both the ethos of elected politicians, and that of civil servants, and which has some potentially problematic implications for democratic governance.

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	5
What Do Policy Professionals Do? Survey of the Research Field	7
Data	10
In Quest of Power	11
Context-Dependent Knowledge	16
Conclusion	20
Endnotes.....	22
References.....	23

Introduction

Even in democratic societies, politics and policy making have always concerned more people than the politicians we elect to office. Civil servants and other public administrators often exert an independent influence on policies and their implementation; organized interest groups affect political strategies and outcomes; intellectuals and independent experts of various kinds provide political ideas and suggest ways to realize them.

That said, it seems that contemporary politics witness the rise of a qualitatively different category of political actors, who are neither elected representatives, nor public administrators or university-based intellectuals. In this paper, I focus on this category of political actors, which I call “policy professionals”. They are people who are *employed* to affect politics and policy, rather than elected to office. But at the same time, they are not civil servants, since they are recruited and expected to affect politics and policy from a partisan standpoint and/or in the promotion of certain values and groups. They are increasingly found as political and policy advisors in government agencies and political parties, in interest organizations, think tanks, and in private firms such as public relations (PR) agencies. They include groups such as political advisors, political secretaries, press chiefs, trade union and business association experts, lobbyists and think-tank intellectuals. This groups therefore spans the divide between purely political advice and advice mainly related to policy making – some of them work mainly with politics (elections, campaigns, bargains, etc), others with details of policy making (but in a partisan mode rather than as public administrator).¹

Policy professionals have grown substantially in numbers in recent decades, and their influence and importance have also clearly become more accentuated. However, comparatively little is yet known about the composition, influence, motivations or careers of this category of political actors. Their work is to a large extent invisible to both the mass media and much of political science research and teaching, which still tends very much to be preoccupied with elected politicians and/or public administration. But there are reasons to be more concerned about the rise of the policy professionals and their approach to politics and policy making than mainstream political science seems to be.

The don of democratic theory – Robert A. Dahl – in fact closed his magnum opus on the state of democracy with a warning call regarding exactly this stratum of unelected political actors. According to Dahl, the influence of these “policy specialists” actually constitutes an “even more formidable” problem for democracy than the one posed by increasing economic inequalities, since these specialists thrive on the increasing complexity of public policies without being fully accountable for their actions. This threatens to cut the policy elites loose from effective democratic control and to result in a form of “quasi guardianship” of the policy elites. This is not a role that these policy specialists necessarily seek, maintains Dahl, but the complexity of current politics and policy making more or less thrusts this role upon them (Dahl 1989: 333-4).

In this paper I analyze the work of policy professionals as a specific craft, probing their motivations and skills in order to ask what constitutes their professional essence. There are several reasons why such an endeavour is important. One is simply that this category of political actors has attracted far less research interest than the one focussed on elected politicians and the public administration. A second is the sheer growth in the number of non-elected political partisans who are active in different phases of the politics-and-policy cycle. A third is that the policy professionals represent a new form of professionalism in political life, different from the professionalization of elected politicians. All these circumstances make it pertinent to probe more deeply than most current research does into what constitutes the specific craftsmanship of policy professionals. Why are they involved in politics in this particular format? Why are they not rather seeking elected public office? What skills and resources do they apply in their work, and where do they acquire them? What implications do their rise have for democratic politics more generally?

In contrast to most current scholarship on non-elected political actors, my analysis thus takes as its starting point a particular *social category* with a particular function in the political system. This distinguishes it from virtually all existing studies in this field that instead take as their starting points existing *organizations* (government agencies, think tanks, etc.), specific *arenas*, or certain *policy processes*. I believe that the perspective outlined here adds new insights. Although policy professionals move among different positions within a particular labour market, with typically very short job tenures, they keep their network contacts and other cognitive and social resources (Author & Colleagues 2015: Ch. 2 and 4). By including the entire political-organizational scene and the trajectories and strategies of policy professionals in this broad landscape, it is possible to get a more complete picture of this category of political actors and its importance for political processes and outcomes.

The setting is current Sweden, a country that was for long characterized by a stable and social-democratic-led political-institutional formation – one that has recently experienced quite far-ranging changes (Svallfors 2015). Among these changes we find a substantial increase in the numbers of policy professionals, in particular among the PR agencies but also among political parties, in the Government Offices² and other organizations. Such changes are interesting since they take place in a post-corporatist political formation, in which both trade unions and business associations are still strong and centralized, and have a formidable research capacity not found in many other places. The move towards more network-based and informal modes of political influence is therefore likely to display specific national characteristics, something we will return to in the closing of the paper.

The paper starts by surveying the relevant research, noting that most of this is organized along lines of organizational type rather than the social category approach that I apply here. Second, the data material on which the analysis is built – stemming from fieldwork in Sweden in 2012-13 – is presented. The first empirical section presents the motivations of policy professionals, while the second discusses their main resource – various forms of politically relevant knowledge. The concluding

section summarizes main findings and discusses their implications for the understanding of this professional category of political actors.

What Do Policy Professionals Do? Survey of the Research Field

What has previous research had to say about the motivations, resources and skills of different kinds of policy professionals? An important starting point is the work of policy analyst Hugh Hecló, who coined the term “policy professional” for this special category of political actors (Hecló 1978). He also discusses the democratic legitimacy and accountability deficits that loom as these quasi-politicians increase in numbers and gain in influence. However, subsequent research by Hecló and research following from his path-breaking paper has tended to focus on the issue networks rather than on the new social category of political actors that he depicts.

The importance of focusing on the whole field of policy professionals and their activities is obvious from reading John Kingdon’s (2011 [1984]) classic study of the policy process. He argues that policy change is effected when three semi-independent streams happen, or are made, to coincide: the stream of social and political problems, the stream of policy solutions, and the political stream (campaigns, elections, bargains, etc.). He also pinpoints the role of “policy entrepreneurs” embedded in “policy communities” in highlighting political and social problems, suggesting solutions to these problems (or in finding problems for which their favourite solutions seem suited), and helping to orchestrate the political process and agenda. In all these aspects of the policy process, we see policy professionals of various kinds in action, and it is imperative that we capture this whole stratum of politically influential actors and not just specific organizations, arenas, or processes (see also Gains and Stoker 2011; Mintrom and Norman 2009).

Some of the research that focuses on specific subgroups and organizational types is highly relevant for my current undertaking. This research includes a broad span of positions and actions, stretching from the work of political advisors in government to the use of knowledge production in order to change the world, conducted by actors located both outside and inside government. Three sets of research seem particularly pertinent. The first focuses on the role of political advisors, including their motivations and everyday work. The second deals with the work of think tanks and other organized producers of knowledge and ideas. The third probes the role of professionals involved in policy work.

Research on political advisors in Westminster and presidential systems has typically focused on the roles and motivation of political advisors in the government offices (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Eichbaum and Shaw 2008; Maley 2011; Shaw and Eichbaum 2012; Yong and Hazell 2014). This research pinpoints important factors in the work of political advisors, such as that their main motivation for working in these roles is a quest for power and influence (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Maley 2011;

Romzek and Utter 1997), that their work is diffuse and surrounded with uncertainty concerning their legitimate space for action, and that it is often unclear to whom and for what political advisors are accountable (Eichbaum and Shaw 2007; Romzek 2000; Romzek and Utter 1997). Furthermore, it is highlighted that political advisors tend to have a somewhat strained relationship with the civil service, since they often constitute a horizontal and dynamic cross-departmental network of power that may come into conflict with the more cautious and departmentally organized practices of the civil service (Dunleavy and Rhodes 1990; Maley 2011; Rhodes 2011; Rhodes 2009).

Outside party politics, the growth of think-tank activities, particularly in the United States, has been at the core of a large number of recent studies. Many of these studies focus on the spectacular growth of think tanks with a market-liberal or conservative advocacy tendency, in contrast to the more steady state of think tanks offering qualified research and analysis. (Medvetz 2012; Rich 2004). More generally, many studies highlight the “brokerage” aspect of what think tanks do when they translate between research and policy making (Rich 2004; Stone 1996). In contrast, some analysts argue that they instead tend to replace and marginalize serious academic research from public discourse (Medvetz 2012: Ch. 4).

Research on the organized production of policy ideas extends beyond studies of think tanks. Some see such knowledge production as based in “epistemic communities” (Haas 1992). An epistemic community is characterized as a tightly knit community which shares the basic outlook and ideas concerning social problems and also shares suggestions for policy solutions. Others choose to investigate the ensemble of knowledge-producing organizations that constitute the “knowledge regime” of a country (Campbell and Pedersen 2014). Such organized producers of knowledge include not only think tanks, but also the research and analysis departments of government agencies, trade unions, business associations and other organized interests.

Policy professionals do not belong to any single organizational type, nor are they all part of a single epistemic community, but they are linked across organizations and domains through their careers and their networks. Such networks and intellectual communities are captured in the literature through concepts such as “issue networks” (Hecl 1978), “policy networks” (Kenis and Schneider 1991; Knoke et al. 1996; Kriesi 2006), “policy communities” (Rhodes and Marsh 1992), or “advocacy coalitions” (Sabatier 1988; 1998). These concepts differ in the extent to which they assume a common normative or intellectual ground for participants in the networks and communities. They also differ in how much they assume there to be hierarchical, formal and stable relationships among participants. But they have a common core in that they argue that the participants in the networks and communities are connected on the basis of common interests, values or policy ideas. They also agree that the commitments to these networks and communities span organizational borders, and that they often compete with the employing organization as the prime basis for loyalty and allegiance among policy professionals. The most important resource that is transmitted in these networks is information. In securing

the flow of such information, actors in political networks tend to nurture both close and distant relations, since both are useful, depending on the case (Carpenter et al. 1998; 2003; 2004).

A distinct set of analyses enquire about new forms of professionalism in policy work (Noordegraf et al. 2014; Nordegraaf 2007; 2015). In contrast to the “old” professions, many of the new professions in the public policy field (such as “program managers” or “strategists”) tend to merge elements from professional and managerial work, and in this way become “hybrid” professions. Important aspects of their work are to use network connectivity in order to achieve their aims, and to control the forms in which their work is controlled by others.

Noordegraaf and colleagues focus public policy professionals who are public administrators, rather than the stratum of partisan professionals that I target. However, their focus on the professional content of the work of policy implementers is highly relevant to my own endeavour. They point out that new forms of policy professionalism are different from the specialized and highly technical skills of old professions in the policy field, and that this new form of professionalism is highly contextual and relations-oriented. As will become obvious, this is something which is characteristic also of the category of policy professionals that are the subject for the current paper.

In summary, we see that much previous research has touched the issues on which this article is centred. This research focuses on different subsets of policy professionals and specific aspects of their work: it includes analyses of the roles and motivations of political advisors, and of the fundamental importance of knowledge production embedded in networks. Still, as pointed out, much of this research tends to stay within a particular organizational type or even a specific position, which makes it hard to see that the work of policy professionals span a whole organizational landscape. It is also the case that most of the existing research is focused on the United States and other Anglo-Saxon countries, and it is not clear how far findings apply to other settings with different organizational and institutional set-ups.

It is also hard to get a clear understanding in the existing research of exactly what policy professionals actually *do* when they use knowledge in a political setting. How do they use it? What sorts of skills do they apply? Where do they get these skills? What role do their networks play? And what exactly are they striving for in their everyday work? What are the attractions and rewards of their line of work? Why are they doing what they are doing? It is the intention of this paper to bring light to such issues.

Data

The analyses in the paper build on fieldwork conducted in Sweden 2012-13. The core data material consists of 71 long (average interview time is about 2.5 hours), semi-structured interviews with policy professionals. Interviewees were strategically

selected in order to cover a broad span in terms of age, gender and professional experiences, as well as different positions and occupational types. In addition, 21 shorter interviews (about one hour each) were conducted with elected politicians (MPs and former government ministers), (newly retired) civil servants, recruiters, and policy professionals working for private enterprises. Table 1 provides an overview of the interviewees and their distribution across organizational types. Interviews were transcribed (about 3500 pages), and pertinent interview quotes were assembled in a 100-page excerpt document.³

Table 1
Interviewees (N= 71; interviewed 2012-2013).
Informants (N=21; interviewed 2013).

Organizational type	<i>Men</i>	<i>Women</i>	<i>Total</i>
Government Offices	8	4	12
Parliamentary Party Office	5	7	12
Local/Regional	6	7	13
Trade Union	5	8	13
Interest Organization	6	3	9
Think Tank	3	2	5
Public Relations Agency	5	2	7
Total	38	33	71
(Former) Government Minister	3	1	4
MPs	4	2	6
(Retired) Civil Servants	1	1	2
Recruiters	5	1	6
Private Companies	3	0	3
Total	16	5	21

The interviews were designed to cover three main topics: (1) the work of policy professionals as a specific form of political influence; (2) the occupation and career choices of policy professionals; and (3) the labour market for policy professionals. For each topic, a number of themes were covered in order to provide a comprehensive picture of the work and careers of policy professionals in Sweden. The current paper builds on a sub-set of these themes, related to (a) the driving forces, motivations, and attractions of the work as policy professional, and (b) the main resources that policy professionals bring to bear on the political game.⁴

The research project also included a quantitative mapping of the group in 2012 (in-

cluding 1468 individuals), containing descriptive information about gender, age, education, and labour market experience among policy professionals.⁵ Information from this descriptive mapping will be used sparingly in the paper to support specific arguments.

To mainly rely on interviews brings both advantages and important limitations. The long thematic interviews allowed nuances to be articulated, and it provided strikingly frank and open discussion of various aspects of the work of policy professionals (provided under guarantees of anonymity). At the same time, we must take into account the self-understanding of the interviewees, who may easily exaggerate or underestimate their own role in politics and policy making. However, the interviews with (ex-)politicians, civil servants and organizational recruiters served as important addenda to the interviews with policy professionals. In general, as will be obvious from the analysis, these additional interviews confirmed what had transpired from the main interviews, that is, that the interviewees' representation of what, how and why they do what they do is shared by groups who come into regular contact with them.

Alternative strategies for eliciting information would certainly have been possible. Two obvious candidates are to rely on survey data (i.e. Yong and Hazell 2014), or direct observations (i.e. Rhodes et al. 2007). We decided against the first strategy for two reasons. First, because we thought it would be next to impossible to achieve an acceptable response rate with this harried group of people, and second, because we knew too little about the category in question to formulate clear-cut survey questions that would really tap the essence of their work. The difference between our approach and using more direct observations should not be exaggerated. All observation studies rely on interviews and conversation in order to make sense of observations, and virtually all our interviews were conducted in a work setting. The difference is more a question of emphasis and nuance. We opted for interviews in order to be able to cover a broader span of organizational types and positions. Direct observation is a very time-consuming strategy, which in practice limits its application to a particular setting or even specific individuals (Rhodes 2011; Rhodes et al. 2007).

In Quest of Power

A key issue that arises from the reading of research on various types of policy professionals is the motivation behind their choice of occupation and career. Why have they opted for such a demanding line of work? What are the main attractions of their job? Why are they not elected politicians? In short, why do they do what they do in the form they do?

If we were to use a single word to capture the motivations and attractions of the work as policy professional among our interviewees, it would have to be *power*. Policy professionals are rarely impartial seekers of truth and knowledge, nor are they simply administrators of the politicians' daily activities, nor are they in search of

personal enrichment and fame. They are what and who they are because they want to change society, in ways consistent with their values and interests. In some cases, this amounts to trying to change the basic political-economic framework of Sweden; in many other cases, it only relates to affecting some of the practices and strategies of their own organizations. But, regardless of the scope of action, the policy professionals seek power, feel that they have power, and that this is perfectly in order.

In the Government Offices, the execution of power is particularly attractive, as the policy professionals become part of the core team that runs the country. A political advisor claims, *“It is a privilege to work here”*, since you constantly execute things *“at an amazing speed of delivery”*. In political opposition, one may sit around and have opinions, but the real satisfaction comes from being *“in power”* and *“delivering”* in the stimulating environment of the Government Offices.

Another political advisor agrees that the opportunity to have an influence is the best aspect of the job – that you are able to make a difference in collaboration with your minister. A press secretary points out, *“This is no regular job – you are here because in some way or another you want to take part in changing the world”* because, as put by a former political advisor, *“to govern is what you want to do if you are politically active. Do you want to sit in opposition? Nope”*.

A former government minister confirms that people who work as political advisors in the Government Offices are driven not by personal career motives, but by the opportunities to wield power:

[M]y experience is that people who come there, they burn for this because they want to affect politics. They love politics. They want to change things – yes, they want to change Sweden and the world. That is why they are at the Government Offices as political collaborators. And they’ve seen an opportunity to maybe realize the dreams they had when they were active in a youth organization or worked politically in different ways in their parties and so on.

Similarly, outside the Government Offices, the opportunities for exercising power are what drive people. A chief of communication at a trade union summarizes, *“I think power is what drives most of all in this world. There is nothing else that can make people do things or abandon things or act in a different way than power.”* A political director at a different trade union feels happy when managing *“to move the position of the debate”*, something that requires good timing, to have a plan for *“getting all the pieces of the puzzle in place”*. And when this succeeds, the satisfaction is enormous, *“almost like a computer game”*.

In the PR agencies, they also feel that they have an influence on the debate and social changes. A PR consultant notes with satisfaction that, even if they do not have a political agenda of their own, *“there are very few political changes that come about without our industry being involved in one way or the other”*, and that goes *“especially for those [changes] that have real effects.”* A recruiter for the PR industry thinks that the slogan of a competitor – *“We Move Power”* – is so *“damn good”* because *“why*

would you go for this if you did not get any influence? And why should you spend hundreds of thousands or several millions if nothing happens in people's heads?"

The desire to wield power is combined with a reluctance to be exposed to personal media attention. A chief of communication at a trade union explains that although your driving force comes from *"making decisions and having opinions and taking part and affecting something in a certain direction"*, this does not mean that you *"sit in the [TV] morning sofa program and want to be seen yourself"* because it is not the fame and attention that is sought. A second chief of communication describes in a similar way how they are the people *"who pulls the strings and orchestrates things and makes people say these things and do these things"*. But they do not want to *"stand in the front in the [evening TV news], while there are lots of circus horses here who kind of 'Oooo', sort of stand in the front row and think that this is incredibly fun. But we are driven by something different, to lay out the playing field in a shrewd, wise and strategic way, and then get to see 'Bang! It was a success! We made it all the way'"*.

Or, as put by a political secretary at the local level, it is nice to be *"the motor"*, the person who *"sends out stuff to other people and makes sure things happen"*. It's about the *"extreme satisfaction"* it brings to *"affect what people do – I don't have to do it but they do as I want"*.

The wish to have influence is often combined with a perception of actually having power, and that this is exactly how it should be. This goes of course especially for the strongest power players, where this political director at a trade union feels that the role is *"to affect politics, not to be affected by politics"*, and continues:

If I look back, I think it is fair to say that I have had a stronger power influence than virtually anybody understands, in a lot of issues – both when it comes to affecting the frame of thought and in concrete proposals. Then, of course, it has not always been me who has been the sender. /.../ I have come up with things, pushed things forward and then someone else has carried it. So the result has been the important thing /.../ You can't come afterwards and say "Hey, that's copyright infringement". So our purpose is to have an impact and /.../ our idea is that others should be carriers of what we think. And when enough people carry the message, then it's possible to get an impact./.../ When there are enough people who start to talk about this, then I can sit here and say, "Damn, I came up with that" or "We pushed that, that is according to my plan". If I had to cash it in every time, then it would be hard to say "No, wait, you can't say that because that is my proposal".

But isn't it bad that you don't get more cred?

No, I don't think so.

No?

No, I think in this job it is rather good. Some people get it, of course...Some of the people in this world that we try to influence understand it. So of course, I get cred too.

Even if most policy professionals prefer to act without being seen, the feeling of being in the midst of events is still important to drive them. They are where it happens; they meet interesting people; they know what has happened before anyone else does. For some policy professionals it is the stimulation of meeting and working with

intelligent people – and to be one of these smart people – that matters most. Like the PR consultant who thinks that they have a high-status occupation because “*my workplace – the business generally speaking but not least my workplace – stands for a very high intellectual ... or a picture of a high intellectual level. You are good if you are here. The smart people are here*”.

For others it is the glamour of the circles of power that is the most attractive aspect. A young PR consultant claims that “*there is a certain kind of glamour*” involved in the people you meet and the arenas in which you act:

We have a super-nice office downtown and I go to fun mingles and I work with management teams and I give strategic advice to management teams – it is cool at my age to get to do that.

But most of all, it is the feeling to be in the middle of politically important events, to be part of the contemporary changes in politics and society, that delights the policy professional. A recruiter for a trade union describes how “*the character of the job is such that really every day you go home from work there is something in the media that has affected you in some way at work. You get a feeling that you are in the middle of events*”. And a press secretary in the Government Offices finds the fact “*that you are in the middle of a flow which means you know things before you read about them in the newspapers, you are a part of affecting what is written in the newspapers ... you hear your political role model use your own words – ‘my thoughts, ideas, are included in what [the minister] says in the [TV news] at night’*” to be the very best aspect of the job.

If the quest for power and the attraction of being in the middle of things are the main driving forces for policy professionals, their main arena for employing this power is the mass media. But while power is seen as unequivocally attractive, the relation to the mass media and journalists is much more ambiguous.

The most common answer to the question of why the policy professionals do not want to become elected politicians – as few of them do – is that they fear the media frenzy and the scrutiny of their personal life and families (Author & Colleagues 2015: Ch. 4; Author 2015a). Constant media pressure, exposure of more or less irrelevant details from their personal lives, and the raising of suspicions about morals and manners are some of the ingredients of what many policy professionals see as unbearable aspects of life as an elected politician.

However, at the same time as the policy professionals fear the unwanted personal media attention, what they want most of all is to get their message out in the media. That is when they feel most satisfied – when the message gets out in the media but they themselves remain outside the limelight. When “*the minister has been very visible*”, “*was seated in the [Swedish national TVs] morning sofa, TV4 and been on [national radio] and that is has turned out well*” as a press secretary in the Government Offices puts it. Because “*even if [the minister] gets the cred it is maybe me or the*

staff who came up with those formulations that made [the minister] look good. Then you are happy and pleased". And "those who do the same kind of thing know that it was you who made it".

A political secretary at the local level agrees:

It is an enormous satisfaction to ponder: "We should fix some op-ed pieces about this and this", and then you make sure somebody writes it, somebody that I know will do it well. /.../ And then when you see it published in [the daily broadsheets] DN or Svenskan...Or as this spread – we didn't think it would be this much. It is a bloody two-page spread!

The mundane work satisfactions often lie in simply getting arguments and ideas into newspapers, radio and TV. Inherent in this is an element of competition: they have to be the first, best and most interesting to capture the attention of journalists in a hurry and looking for an angle. At the same time the professionals must remain unseen themselves and receive no credit for what they have achieved. A PR consultant speaks of this as "*a sporting moment in media relations*" and although they always act on behalf of a paying client, the achievement gives the same satisfaction, because it is more important to get the words out than to be seen personally as the actor.

This game often consists in getting the news media to run the stories on their own initiative, to let them be the initiators and senders of messages that the policy professional wants to deliver. A press secretary in the Government Offices explains:

And then you have to sit here and write and think about "How can we use other ambassadors for this?" because the politician is not always the most credible sender and then it's better to get someone else to say exactly what we want them to say. /.../ So we do not stand in the TV studio and say, "Hey, you have to borrow ten billion to do this". It is better if [the TV journalist] Mats Knutson asks them, "But my god, this costs ten billion. How are you going to finance it?"

The problematic symbiosis between the policy professionals and the mass media can be summarized as one where policy professionals fear and loathe the mass media, at the same time as they get most of their daily information from this source and are most happy when they manage to spin a good story themselves. The media climate that the policy professionals criticize is one which they have actually helped to create.

Context-Dependent Knowledge

To achieve their aims policy professionals need to muster their cognitive and social resources. But what resources are deployed in this mediated power game? As we could suspect from the reading of the research literature, the main resource of policy professionals is politically useful knowledge, and their most important skill lies in the production and dissemination of such knowledge. But this knowledge should not be primarily understood as academically constructed and highly generalizable

propositions. Instead, it consists of a set of contextually applicable skills, of which three forms seem particularly pertinent: *problem formulation*, *process expertise* and *information access*.

Problem formulation is about describing contemporary society, to use descriptions grounded in facts and science but presented from an angle that benefits the values and groups that one represents, and to suggest possible policy solutions. If you succeed in this, a political director at a trade union maintains, politicians are often easy to influence: “*There is a request for knowledge coming from politicians, for example, or from power holders in society. And if you possess that knowledge and can give it to them, then you can influence them quite easily*”.

This takes stamina. Arguments about the state of things have to be rubbed in over a long course of time in order to affect politics. A political director at a trade union states that they “*have pursued some questions that eventually made their way into the public debate*” in spite of the fact that they were initially seen as “*very odd*” and completely ignored. In this process, it is important to work through the public debate rather than trying to influence politics directly since politics has become weaker and “*more and more reactive*” over time. If you want to change things, it is imperative to show politicians that “*status quo cannot be the solution*” as put by a director of a business association:

I have never experienced a politician at a reception saying, “That was smart. I never thought about that. We have to go home and do it”. Instead you always have to go into the debate where you identify the problem and eventually also the solution. And when that is done, then the politicians start to work.

The systematic marshalling and presenting of new evidence is an important power resource in the craftsmanship of the policy professional. Research is engaged and new facts and standpoints are produced. This has to be done in a reliable and scientific way to increase trustworthiness, but it is all done in order to advance the conditions for the groups and interests that one is employed to promote.

But there is a second, quite different, way in which knowledge is important to the policy professionals. That is manifested in knowing the political game: to know *where* in the complex political system decisions are really made, *when* you have to act in the policy process, and *how* political actors think and act. This is the political specialists’ particular advantage over lay actors, and the one Robert Dahl warned about as a potential perversion of democracy (Dahl 1989: 364ff). In order to fully obtain this particular form of knowledge, people need a stint in the heart of the government apparatus – the Government Offices. And the largest benefit of this knowledge is perhaps reaped once they have left the Government Offices to work for other interests, such as PR agencies, private firms or interest organizations. Private firms and many other social actors “*seldom have a reality-based picture of exactly where you should have the dialogue or where you should try to have an influence*” claims a former political advisor who now works for a private firm, “*perhaps you*

need to have been there yourself in order to understand where things are decided". The advisor continues:

You may not know everyone at that level but you need to make a judgment: "Where is this going to be decided?" /.../ Somehow you become really really good at understanding "OK, it will end up like this" "Yes, but there is a commission first and everything" "Sure, but read my lips, this is how it will end up". It's because you have become so quick in taking everything into account. /.../ I mean, you already know how it will end! Do you understand?

In a similar way, a political director at a trade union knows how to "*find the right way in the system*", knows who to contact and in what stage. The Government Offices and the state bureaucracy "*are not a big mush to me: I know who to call by name and number. And that is such a big help when you are in a situation when you should try to influence the right person*".

A PR consultant maintains that this insider knowledge is invaluable in the current work:

I've worked with national politics. I've worked with European politics. I've worked in the European Parliament, at the Department of Finance, and I've worked with international politics./.../ So I've learned processes at a very high level in that way. How a government works, how European collaboration works, at the ministerial level. /.../ It gives you a tremendous insight into the political game...and all that is something I have use for here. How a politician functions, how they interact, how decisions are made in everything from a political party to a lobbying organization. I've been part of political receptions many times /.../ as an advisor to a politician. So I've seen lobbying from all angles. I've seen media life. I was there when things got rough for my politicians, I've seen them /.../agonize before government reshuffles and all that. It has been very instructive, and all this is useful now. All this is something others need to know.

To know the nooks and crannies of politics and policy making is therefore a fundamental aspect of the necessary skills of a policy professional. This is also the most important skill that the PR agencies buy when they employ ex-politicians and ex-political advisors. Knowing *people* is important, but not as important as knowing the *processes* (Author & colleagues 2015: Ch. 4; Author 2015b).

But there is yet another aspect of knowledge production in the policy professional world where access to people matters more: fast access to information and correct data. Often policy professionals need to know immediately where an issue lies at that moment, or quickly get hold of some specific facts that can be used as political ammunition. And in such a collection of information, the personal networks are extremely important. A political secretary in parliament describes the personal network as invaluable "*when you can just pick up the phone and get to know what is happening, and 'why did it turn out this way?' and 'what kind of strange case is this?'*"

So the most important aspect of the personal networks is not that they give access and backchannels for influence, but that they provide quick, almost frictionless, channels of information, as put by this political secretary:

If we had the money, maybe we would have employed these people. Now we don't have money. But then you have to secure the flow of information. I want to find out things quickly as hell. And it's damn good if you want to find out things. I know someone who works for [the blue collar trade union] LO, I know someone who works in parliament. I know someone who works for the EU Commission. I know someone who works just about anywhere. Then I can call and check: "What about this?" It is a question of favours and returning favours.

From the other side of the information exchange – because it is often to the civil servants in the Government Offices people turn to get vital information – the importance of knowing people “on the inside” is confirmed. If you have no contacts, you get almost no information, but an old acquaintance can provide a lot, according to this former civil servant:

If your old work mate calls you, who you know and trust, you can say something like this: “Yes we are dealing with this right now but it will take a few more weeks”. And then they ask, “Can I call on the first of April?” and you say, “No, call on the thirteenth”. But when another person you don't know asks, then you say, “No, you have to call later in the spring”. There may be subtle little differences [that matter a lot].

The information, however, not only has to be fast; it has also to be reliable. In politics the tiniest error will be used to undermine confidence in the messenger. So the horror is that one's closest politician or elected representative will stand in the media spotlight and say things that are simply wrong. Any incorrect interpretation or any wrong numbers will lead the politician “*to stand there and take the shit for something I gave them*”, as put by a political secretary in parliament. A second political secretary says that it is “*rather stressful*” that one is never allowed to make the slightest mistake, and describes a situation where a minister “*got the wrong numbers – not from me but from someone else in the election campaign /.../ – it becomes an immediate scandal*”.

The horror is just as great from the other side, when the elected politician realizes that the factual grounds are shaky. A former minister tells about how bad it can be:

For example, I got 100% confirmation from them that I /.../could say “This and this!” and then it turned out that I couldn't say that – it was wrong. And as a minister I can't check all the numbers, all the details. /.../ I said “Can I say X?” “Yes”, they tell me. I say this and then there is this enormous media turmoil.

Wouldn't it be possible at that moment to point to the political advisor and say, “It wasn't my fault”?

No, no, no. You can't do that, I am the one responsible.

Providing fast and correct information is a game with little tolerance for even the smallest mistake. As pointed out in the previous section, many policy professionals enjoy the quick pace of their work, but the flipside is a constant fear of making mistakes that will expose “their” politician or organizational representative to attacks.

Where do the policy professionals get the skills they need for deploying these three forms of knowledge? Almost everyone among the policy professionals in our

data base has some university education. The average education level is somewhere between a Bachelor's degree and a Master's, but only a few hold a PhD degree or a professional degree (Author & Colleagues 2015: Table 4). Most interviewees and all recruiters agree that university education is a necessary prerequisite to cope with the job demands. But it is not so much the content of the university education that is important – it is more a question about acquiring generic analytical skills and learning how to put arguments into written and spoken form. Political science (32%), followed by economics (17%) is unsurprisingly the most common major subject among the policy professionals (Author & Colleagues 2015: Table 5). But many interviewees claim that the actual content of the political science education is of little importance. The reality of politics is far removed from what is taught in the university courses, and the necessary process expertise is acquired on the job.

The mixture of the three forms of politically useful knowledge form the basis for an important dividing line among policy professionals – the one between “hacks” and “wonks”. In current political journalism, “hacks” refer to political actors who are mostly interested in the political game for its own sake, who are focused on selling political standpoints to the public and the media, and who see communication as the core of politics. Wonks are people who are mostly interested in building institutions and policies, who focus on formulating long-term ideas and reform plans, and think analysis is the core of politics and policy making (Medvetz 2012: 173-4; Reed 2004).

The distinction between hacks and wonks is sometimes explicitly present in the reflections of policy professionals about their work:

[In] the American debate, there are those “hacks” and “wonks”, and I am a wonk. Hacks, they are the people who are interested in the game, they are interested in the packaging./.../ I am interested in the content. But of course, I do not look down on that – it is absolutely necessary that in order to make something out of that content you got to have someone who can sell it and package it and so on. It is not that I think it is unimportant and /.../ I understand that bit. But it is not what I think is fun. (political advisor, Government Offices)

A typical wonk relies mostly on the ability to act in the problem formulation phase, using science and research in order to promote their ideas. For a wonk the political game, including communication and selling, is something that has to be endured, a necessary evil to get the ideas across. Compromises are sometimes necessary. You cannot act as a researcher in the political game – you need some degree of process expertise as well:

Yes, I am very much in favour of that. Science. And sometimes that collides a little bit with this political game. And that I think is something many experts feel, when you come as an expert and, yes, there is a bit of conflict sometimes in that you cannot be a researcher and do politics and think that this is a feasible role. /.../ [Y]ou cannot be as nitpicking as when you are a researcher and have a hang-up on the decimals, but it's the big picture and “now we have to take our chances” and “this looks good”. (political secretary in parliament)

For the hacks, the political game is what makes their hearts beat faster, while con-

tent sometimes takes a secondary role. You have to sell whatever is necessary in order to win debates and elections. Process expertise is essential and information access important, while the ability to formulate problems is less central for the hack:

I have always been more interested in the communication than in the knowledge. /.../ So the political game, the political...power game and strategic thinking. “How do we communicate, how do we sell this?” /.../ [I] want precisely this challenge: “Whatever you come up with in this room I will sell it.” And it is a bit tempting to think, “How will I get these people to accept this idea?”, even if it sucks. Even if we know this is a crappy reform, but we have to do it. But I have to get 7.5 million voters to think it is fantastic. (press secretary in the Government Offices)

Neither the hacks nor the wonks can do without the three forms of knowledge and skills that this section has presented. But the relative weight of those three forms shifts, depending on the basic role orientation of the policy professional, and their specific job tasks.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the craftsmanship of policy professionals, focusing on their motivations and their main resources. The main motivation for policy professionals is found in a desire to wield power and influence the course of affairs, while the mundane working-life satisfaction often comes from getting their message into the media without becoming personally exposed to media attention. The key resource that policy professionals bring to bear on politics and policy making is context-dependent politically useful knowledge, in three main forms. Problem formulation involves highlighting and framing social problems and their possible solutions, using research and other relevant knowledge. Process expertise consists of “knowing the game” and understanding the “where, how and why” of the political and policy making processes. Information access is the skill to find (very fast) reliable relevant information.

In sum, these motivations and skills form the core of what it means to be a policy professional. They include embedded and relational knowledge production and usage that is similar to other forms of professionalism involved in the making of public policy, such as the “hybrid” and “connective” professionalism analysed by Noordegraaf and colleagues (Noordegraaf et al. 2014; Noordegraaf 2007; 2015). However, the professionalism analysed in this paper is of a particular politically partisan kind. This partisan element, often combined with a certain patronage element since many policy professionals are tied to the fate of particular politicians, is something that thwarts a development into a “pure” form of professionalization (including legitimation, established credentials, etc). Policy professionals are political rather than purely professional creatures regarding both their motivations and their practices and careers (Author 2015b).

But they are political creatures of a slightly different kind than elected politicians. Their motivations and practices epitomize a certain kind of “entrepreneurial ethos”,

which differs both from the representation-and-responsibility ethos that should characterize the elected politician, and from the public-spirit ethos that should be typical of civil servants (Lundquist 1998; Weber 1946 [1919]). The entrepreneurial ethos includes *innovation* as the prime goal – in politics this means coming up with new political ideas and policy solutions, and finding ways to present and sell such ideas and solutions. This has to be conducted in a relentless pursuit with the mass media as the most important arena. Such an entrepreneurial ethos is likely to at least occasionally come into conflict with the politicians' or civil servants' ethoi (cf. Author 2015a; (Mintrom and Norman 2009)).

In many ways, the policy professionals appear as a new social category in the political landscape, which adds to and transforms the way politics and policy making are conducted. They have their own ethos, skill sets, standards for success and reward systems.⁶ The democratic implications of their activities may give rise to some concerns, such as those articulated by Robert Dahl (1989) and which we have already cited at some length. The work of policy professionals contribute to a complexity spiral in politics and policy making: they are brought in partly as a response to a more complex political environment, but far from reducing such complexity, their activities (in framing issues, using personal networks, or avoiding unwanted media attention) tend to increase political complexity even further. This in turn makes organized politics harder to understand or affect for lay actors or the general public. Politics in the policy professional guise therefore displays some disturbing similarities with pre-democratic modes of organizing political power. Now, as then, the “court politics” of unelected political actors includes arcane and diffuse procedures taking place behind the official scene.

It should be remembered, however, that the analysis in this paper is restricted to a single country, and it is not clear how far results and arguments should be extrapolated to other national contexts. There are some relevant characteristics of Sweden that could lead us to suspect that some of the results in the paper may be specific for this country. One is that organized interests, as pointed out in the introduction, are quite strong, something which makes the space for other producers of information and arguments, such as think tanks, quite narrow. A second is that the rise of political PR is quite recent in comparison with for example the US. In combination, these two facts could mean that the “wonk” side of the policy professional spectrum – emphasising long-term policy analysis and solutions and staying close to “science” – is comparably strong in Sweden compared to the “hack” side – where fixing of more short-term problems related to the communication of politics is in the focus.

But these are mere speculations – it could well be that the findings of this paper are quite generic across different types of national polities and contexts. A comparative analysis of this particular category of political actors is therefore called for. In any case, the analysis of the skills and motivations of policy professionals in a single country that this paper has provided should be seen as a contribution to a larger enterprise related to the understanding of changing politics and policy making in the advanced democratic countries.

Endnotes

1. It might be questioned whether one should then denote the groups as “policy professionals”, since not all of them work in typical policy making positions. In line with the original uses of the term I will nevertheless stick with it. The difference between politics as such and policy making is also not very clear for this category of political actors. An alternative would be to invent the (highly awkward) term “polpol professionals” to take both sides of their work into account, but I will refrain from that.
2. In Sweden, the Government Offices form a single, integrated public authority comprising the Prime Minister’s Office, the government ministries and the Office for Administrative Affairs. (<http://www.government.se/the-government-offices/>)
3. For further details of the data collection and analysis, see Author & Colleagues (2015: Methods Appendix).
4. All translations from Swedish for this paper were made by the author. In order to guarantee the anonymity of interviewees, specific organizational titles are sometimes replaced with more generic ones, and the gender of the interviewees is withheld.
5. Information from this mapping was collected mainly from open web sources complemented with a small-scale survey to local and regional political secretaries.
6. And similar to many other professional groups they to some extent even have their own lingo which may be hard for outsiders to understand.

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BOX 591, SE-101 31 STOCKHOLM
SWEDEN
PHONE: +46 8-402 12 00
E-POST: INFO@IFFS.SE
WWW.IFFS.SE