

Representation – public servants in public

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Abstract

In scholarship on public servants they are represented in various ways across disciplines as we can see from the various contributions to this handbook. This section of the book considers how public servants are represented in broader public culture. A key question addressed is whether we want our public servants to be ideal heroes, or whether we need to represent the worst of public servants as part of making them accountable. Looking across public culture, from comedy, to political satire, and factual representations in a series of portraits, news stories from autocratic states and job adverts, the chapters in this section bring together a varied range of theoretical approaches to understanding public servants with these popular representations. In doing so, the chapters tell us a great deal about how such representations reflect society, and also illuminate the different ways we can apply theory to understand public servants and public service.

Introduction – the public public servant

That public servants *are* public might seem such an obvious and banal topic that it does not require a section in a handbook about public servants. However, as the chapters in this section illuminate, the very fact that public servants *are* public is a bedrock of liberal democracy. Some public servants we would expect to be in public – elected officials, in all but the most corrupt states or areas, need to be accountable to their electors and at every election need to be very public to win office. The trend towards accountability over the past 40 years, and the questioning of professional expertise, means that we should also hope that our appointed public servants are also in public, responding to the needs and feedback of citizens and others with whom they engage. Drawing on Habermas' theorisation of deliberative democracy, public servants should be part of the public sphere, whether they are elected or appointed (Habermas, 1989). It is through engagement with the public, in public, that norms can be negotiated and established. However, and importantly for this chapter, it is through such publicness that the legitimacy of public servants can be established: can we trust these people to deliver services and treat service users with respect? In the current climate, an even more pertinent question might be: can we trust these people to tell the truth?

Yet such representation of public servants is a surprisingly under-researched area (see the chapter by Borry in this section). Because of this, this section of the handbook might be different to what is expected. Rather than being an instruction manual for public servants on how to represent themselves, the chapters rather provide original analyses and interpretations of representations to allow us all to reflect on how public servants are imagined in academic analysis and popular culture.

The real and imagined public servant in scholarship

Public servants have been represented in scholarship since bureaucracies have been studied. Weber presented the bureaucracy, and the bureaucrats within it, as the epitome of rationality in modern society. As such, the public servant represented the alienation that rationality imbued on the world (Weber, 1978). As public administration scholarship developed, the role of the public servant in the successful delivery of policy became an increasing focus. From Weber's rational technocrat emerged

Lindblom's policy maker working within bounded rationality, making decisions within the context of the knowledge they knew with rules-of-thumb and tacit knowledge (Lindblom, 1959).

Decades of research across the social sciences have now produced richer representations of the public servant in scholarship across disciplines, as we can see from the other sections of this Handbook. A key drive for this has been the questioning of expertise that has occurred over the past 40 years. Some of this is almost caricature. From the right, public servants were portrayed as bureau-maximising rational actors, seeking to advantage themselves through the expansion of the state (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994). From the left, public servants were characterised as unfeeling technocrats running rough-shod over the needs of citizens and communities. At the best, this was out of a sense of paternalistic protection and at its worst it was a patronising attempt to silence dissent in support of a state that was propping up the capitalist world order (Cockburn, 1977).

The reaction to these challenges has been to change representations of the public servant to understand them as upholding broader civic and societal values, recognising the work done to reshape roles to make public services more responsive and deepen democracy ([Trajectories of Reform](#)). This has led to representations of the public servant as an actor upholding and maximising public value, in the model of a CEO and the staff of a private-sector organisation maximising shareholder value (Moore, 1995). This public servant might be operating in the context of the philosophy of the New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006). Reacting against the philosophy of the New Public Management designed to keep the bureau-maximising public servant in-check, the public servant in this context is negotiating between the competing demands of citizens; collaborating across the public, voluntary and private sector; and co-producing services to deliver tailored public services. In this context we have the emergence of the twenty-first century public servant (Needham and Mangan, 2016)([What does the public servant of the future look like?](#)).

Such scholarship turns our focus to the motivations and institutional contexts of public servants. The literature on Public Service Motivation (PSM) (Perry and Wise 1990) gives us a more nuanced portrayal of public servants ([Values and Motivation](#)). As such, they are either: driven by a shared norm to deliver good government and support citizens; driven by an emotional commitment to a program or service; or they are acting entirely in their own self-interest. While such approaches allow us to elaborate on what drives the agency of public servants, focusing on the institutional context and logics further allows us to explore in what circumstances public servants can flourish. The public servant motivated by their own self-interest would no doubt flourish in the context of an organization with a culture driven by the institutional logic of the New Public Management, using the performance culture to advance themselves.

Reviewing how the public servant has been represented in scholarship raises the question of whether we want to represent an *ideal public servant*, providing an instruction manual on how to do the job and deliver a utopia of effective policy making, or whether scholarship should be a realistic, warts-and-all portrayal of the development of policy and the delivery of public services. As we shall see, this is also a tension in the representation of public servants in popular culture.

Different methodologies have given us more varied and nuanced representations of the public servant that move us away from ideal types. The rich seam of scholarship coming after Lipsky's *Street Level Bureaucracy* represented the frontline public servant as a key part of the policy-making process, using their discretion to allocate scarce resources, effectively creating policy in implementation (Lipsky, 1980). Interpretive and critical approaches to policy analysis and public administration have also enriched our representations, re-presenting public servants as meaning-making actors recreating and re-making policy as they discuss, share and implement it. As such, they

carry the biases of policy with them, for example in the ways in which they discuss “problem populations” or reinforce stigma and resulting inappropriate ways of implementing policy.

Finally, more critical approaches represent the darker side of public servants and how they reflect the negative sides of society. In these representations in scholarship, public servants are highlighted as being classist, racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic and ableist. At the activist end of scholarship, these representations start to move us towards the subject of this section of the handbook – the broader public representation of public servants. These accounts are intended to be part of a critical project to hold public servants, and public services, to account for the discrimination and bias they uphold.

Public servants are represented in a variety of ways across our scholarship. These representations hold in tension whether we want our public servants to be ideal heroes, or to recognise them as flawed people, and whether we want our scholarship to be an instruction manual to create the perfect public servant, or a mirror to reveal the flaws in public service and public servants? The question this book section now seeks to ask is how are these representations in-turn reflected in how we see public servants in popular culture.

Why are public servants represented in public?

The differences and tensions in how we represent public servants in scholarship are present in popular culture. Should they be unquestioningly celebrated or subject to criticism and challenge regarding their motives and actions? Alas, a practical limit to the extent to which someone can be immersed in global cultures, puts a limit on what this author can draw on here to describe this, but hopefully the reader will forgive this blinkering.

Returning to the role of the public sphere in Habermas’ conception of it in society, the most basic way public servants are represented is in factual accounts in the news media. A cursory look at old news footage clearly shows how advanced democracies have shifted over time from an uncritical account of the actions of public servants, and a subservience to expertise and elite social positions, to a more challenging news media. The growth of rolling 24-hour television news following the launch of CNN in 1980 has led many to lament its role in our public debate, questioning whether the immediacy of reporting leaves enough time for analysis and interpretation.

This notwithstanding, the representation of public servants, particularly elected officials, is a key mechanism delivering accountability in advanced democracies. Citizens quite rightly want the decisions of their policy-makers and leaders challenged publicly. The motivations and rationales for policy choices need to be unpacked and explored and where they go against norms, they need to be questioned. Implementation failures need to be revealed, particularly where they negatively impact on the most vulnerable in society, or involve bribery or corruption.

Fictional accounts of political life and policy-making, such as *The West Wing* and the French television drama *Les Hommes de l’Ombre* (*The Shadow Men*, translated as *Spin*), show, this increasingly challenging news context has created a cat-and-mouse game between elected public servants, their teams managing PR and the news media. As such, the representation of public servants has become highly managed. This has blurred into satirical fictional accounts: the UK television comedy *The Thick of It* (made internationally famous by the film version *In The Loop*) includes a famous scene where the spin doctor makes the politician’s driver go around a roundabout repeatedly to give them time to come up with a policy announcement before a press conference in response to the latest moral panic created by the news media.

Thus, we have come to expect our elected public servants to be regularly challenged by our news media, and we have become cynical about how much their image is managed and how much of what they say is true. In countries with a strong delineation between elected officials who are allowed to openly express partisan, ideological views, and non-elected public servants who are meant to objectively *serve* their elected counterparts, the presentation of non-elected public servants can be more problematic as it is much more difficult for them to openly respond to criticism without breaking the veneer of objectivity. Indeed, the presumption is that when a crisis strikes, it is the elected public servants that will be thrust into the limelight to answer criticisms and be accountable for decisions.

A common way for such public servants to be regularly factually portrayed is in fly-on-the-wall documentaries. These usually follow “blue light” emergency services doing their work, portraying them as the heroes for citizens in need. In New Zealand, the police documentary *Police Ten 7* accidentally became an international cultural icon after it broadcast footage of an officer apprehending a suspect and advising him to “always blow on the pie” from a service station to avoiding being burnt. The UK television series *One Born Every Minute*, placing cameras in the maternity wards of major hospitals has now become a global franchise in France, the USA, Sweden, Israel, Spain, Slovakia, Czechia, Denmark and Australia making stars of the midwives and other maternity staff as much as the new parents appearing.

Occasionally unelected public servants are the focus of media attention. Arguably, the agencification that occurred in many states following reforms inspired by the New Public Management philosophy has made this more likely to occur. The enforced separation of strategic policy-making and implementation means it is heads of agencies that that are accountable for delivery failures. Resignation of Chief Executive Officers is the ultimate accountability. However, this does raise issues of how public the representation of such public servants should be and whether this accountability is appropriate. One high profile case in the UK highlights this issue well. In 2007 a toddler in the London Borough of Haringey, Peter Connelly, was killed by his parents while they were being regularly engaged by the overstretched social work department in the local authority. They were jailed in 2008 and the resulting political crisis, stoked by the tabloid news media led to the Secretary of State for Children and Families sacking the head of social work at Haringey, Sharon Shoesmith. Ultimately she was made to be accountable for a wider systemic failure in child protection services. However, Shoesmith was an employee covered by employment law and took her case to court claiming unfair dismissal. She won her claim, receiving substantial damages, suggesting that trial by media to make unelected public servants accountable has limits (Jones, 2014).

More generally, in our current times Tom Lehrer’s famous comment that “political satire became obsolete when they awarded Henry Kissinger the Nobel Peace Prize” seems terrifyingly apt. For many, the mess of Brexit, Donald Trump (and numerous other examples from across the world) might seem beyond satire, or they effectively satirise themselves in how ridiculous they are compared to our norms of good governance and how we want our public servants to behave. Yet a recent fictional drama broadcast by the BBC in the UK, *Years and Years* evoked what may happen if we allow this representation of public servants to persist. Following the rise of a populist politician, Vivienne Rook (played by Emma Thompson), in the UK in the future, the drama at one point showed her commenting on the ubiquity of deep-fake videos on the internet distorting public discourse in a TV interview. In this scene, she turns to camera and ominously says: “we all know they’re fake, but we know they’d probably say that”.

Such fictional representations of public servants also reveal the same tensions regarding how we think about public servants as examined in research and in factual accounts. The ubiquity of the

police procedural drama is now such an everyday part of our television schedules that it is easy to forget they are a representation of public servants. Some of these emphasise the *ideal* of the police officer or detective, heroically solving crimes and protecting citizens: *Columbo*, *Ironside*, *Law and Order*, *Forbrydelsen (The Killing)*. Increasingly though they reveal the darker side of public service – corruption and illegal activities: *The Wire*, *Line of Duty*, *Engrenages (Spiral)*. The psychological focus of these dramas on the detective also explores the public-service motivation of these police officers, for example how the commitment to the job leads to other relationships breaking down (divorce and family estrangement is an ongoing theme); and also how difficult real-life situations and immediacy of decision-making requires ethics-in-action: do I shoot this suspect making a decision on guilt myself, or let them face justice? Do I ignore this law or process in the interests of wider justice, or do I insist on following procedures even if the killer could strike again?

From the very earliest days of television drama, the heroic role of public servants in hospitals has also been fodder for dramatists: *Emergency – Ward 10* was broadcast for ten years in the UK from 1957; *General Hospital* has run in America since 1963. The ground-breaking American drama *ER* ran from 1994-2009 making stars of Ming-na Wen and George Clooney, although it is beaten in longevity by the much more sedate BBC drama *Casualty* that has been broadcast since 1986.

Other public servants or services have not been the focus of fictional accounts to the same degree. A character in a book or television series might happen to be a public servant, but this is rarely central to their role in the unfolding drama. Similarly, there has been a reticence to make elected public servants the central focus of dramas. One key area where a lot of drama has been written about elected officials is in novels written *by* elected officials, which date back at least to the novels of UK Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli in the nineteenth century. In television dramas representing elected public servants, the tension between gritty reality and idealism is present. The BBC production of *House of Cards* was originally a novel written by Michael Dobbs a former advisor to Margaret Thatcher who left his role after being rudely snubbed by the Prime Minister after she won the 1987 General Election. The three seasons, originally broadcast after 1990, followed the machinations of Francis Urquhart as he used illegal means to become Prime Minister: killing the journalist who could unseat him; forcing the king to abdicate; and eventually being assassinated on the order of his wife to protect his reputation. The series, and its storylines, is now internationally famous thanks to the Netflix remake.

Beginning in 2013, the US remake of *House of Cards*, with its cynical portrayal of Frank Underwood's rise to power for many contrasted with the ideal of republican democracy. As such it contrasts with the more ideal portrayal of elected public servants in *The West Wing*. For many, the contrast is emblematic of changes in society and politics, the rise of populism, and the decline in basic principles of good governance. Conservative critics of *The West Wing* might also point out that it represented an idealised view of Liberal government within the USA.

Lastly, in discussing representations of public servants in popular culture we must consider satire and comedy. As a means of usurping the power of elected public servants and autocratic rulers, satire has a rich history. Often it has been the most populist of forms of popular culture, for example using crude representations in graffiti to make base comments on the suitability of rulers. The advent of the printing press led to the rise of censorship to protect the reputations of leaders, and as we will see in the chapters in this section, this is a practice that continues today. However, in liberal democracies satire has become a central way in which we hold public servants to account. Indeed, at times comedians and satirists can become policy entrepreneurs through highlighting the absurdity of the status quo (Pepin-Neff and Caporale, 2018). As discussed in this book section, to be plausible satire has to portray its subjects in a somewhat realistic way, otherwise the audience will not believe

the premise of the joke. The easy way to do this is through pictorial representations and caricature. However, aping the trends of other forms of popular culture, satire increasingly evokes known realities to poke fun at them, such as the faux fly-on-the-wall documentary style of *Parks and Recreation* and *The Thick of It*, or the drama of 24-hour rolling news in the classic British television series *The Day Today* and *Brass Eye*. Returning to Tom Lehrer's comment about satire above, the fact that the satirical newspaper *The Onion* can now publish things the administration of President Trump has *actually done* as satire makes it seem that satire is now redundant. But the fact that satire has to carefully evoke a reality to make the joke land makes it an ideal subject for exploring how public servants are represented in popular culture.

Interpreting the representation of public servants

Because of the ways that public servants are represented in popular culture, paralleling many of our concerns in public administration scholarship, analysing such representations offers an interesting, and amusing, way to explore the public servant. This section begins with an analysis of a representation of public servants that many who research public administration and public policy have a soft-spot for: *Parks and Recreation* the US television series showing the efforts of Lesley Knope to do good in the fictional town of Pawnee. As Borry's analysis shows, even though *Parks* is a comedy, in the portrayal of the key characters it brings out issues that are core to the way in which we understand public servants and public administration: public service motivation and ethics. We therefore explore the motivations for work that are demonstrated in an exaggerated way by the characters and thus their ethical (or unethical) responses to the situations they find themselves in.

The chapter by Bjerge and Rowe moves us on to a much simpler portrayal of public servants – a simple set of portraits of bureaucrats at their desks. As the authors write, the desk is deeply symbolic of bureaucracy, invoking the Weberian ideal-type of the rational, impersonal bureaucrat. Yet as drawn out by the analysis by Bjerge and Rowe supporting the beautiful portraits, the small ways in which these public servants personalise their desk-spaces, and also the ways they represent the bureaucratic culture of their countries, tells us a lot about public servants linking back to the concerns of scholarship. As Bjerge and Rowe elaborate, some of these portraits are almost comic in how stereotypical they are: the portrait of President Putin looking down on the Russian Bureaucrat; the assorted pieces of hunting memorabilia surrounding the American Police Chief. Others leave the reader more thoughtful: the Indian bureaucrat is surrounded by the most haphazard filing system imaginable that we hope the woman can navigate to do her job effectively.

As discussed above, fictional accounts of public servants tend to focus on the heroes of the emergency services, but Rek-Woźniak's analysis of the Polish television series *The Deep End* interprets a fictional account of heroic social workers. Blurring the lines between the managed image of the ideal public servant that a spin doctor would try to develop and the gritty realism of dramas such as *The Wire*, *The Deep End* was effectively propaganda, commissioned by a government ministry to improve the image of social workers in Poland, who were vilified in the press as child-snatchers. However, in creating the dramatic tension needed for a television series, Rek-Woźniak highlights how *The Deep End* minimised the problems faced by social workers. The public servants are portrayed as selfless heroes, as Spiderman or Mother Theresa, breaking rules to transform people's lives, ignoring the poor status, poor pay and high workloads that social workers face in their working lives. Further, by focusing on the transformational role of the social workers on *individuals'* lives the series also reinforced neo-liberal models of the social worker in society. Rather than supporting individuals whose lives have been negatively affected by socio-structural issues – patriarchal violence, unemployment and low wages – *The Deep End* constructs the clients of social

workers as individuals who have lost their way and who just need the careful guiding hand of their social worker to steer them back towards being the good, responsible citizen.

The debates about the public accountability of public servants discussed above might, rightly, lead readers to point out that this is a privilege afforded to those in liberal democratic states. Our next chapter by Knox and Janenova on the Central Asian States of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan analyses how public servants are depicted in authoritarian regimes. In a context of post-Soviet, one-party authoritarian regimes, this analysis questions what we mean by “public servants” – these are not elected politicians accountable to a public, or unelected bureaucrats serving them, but party appointees blurring categories. Going back to Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, Turkmenistan’s president Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow is akin to the authoritarian monarchs of pre-Modern Europe. Like Louis XIV, he is the state and the “public” and to question otherwise is to risk imprisonment or worse. Even in the more liberal regimes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Knox and Janenova highlight the fragility of a censored, controlled public sphere that is struggling to hold leaders to account. Following crises of policy-making, although the emergent public sphere criticizes ministers in its representation of them as public servants, this does not necessarily lead to policy change or a change in personnel.

The situation in these states contrasts with the following chapter by Crines, looking at satirical representations of elected public servants. The UK has a centuries-old tradition of political satire due to the relaxation of censorship from the seventeenth centuries onwards, with the eighteenth century cartoonist Hogarth regarded as a master of the art. With the erosion of the faith in experts and deference to authority in the period after 1945, British political satire flourished and in 1961 one of the subjects of Crines’ chapter, the satirical magazine *Private Eye* was first published. Crines uses rhetorical analysis of articles in *Private Eye* and episodes of the aforementioned *The Thick of It* to explain how satire represents public servants in a way which is both believable, picks up on tropes that the readers or viewers will understand, and produces the comic effect intended to hold the public servants accountable.

The final chapter in this section deals most explicitly with concepts of the ideal public servant, focusing on job advertisements in Swedish government agencies, which are in effect what the agency believes their ideal public servant to be. In her analysis of advertisements by two agencies that were involved with scandals, Reitan discusses how the agencies portrayed themselves as modern organizations and how they imagined their perfect employee to be. As such, the advertisements are portraying the institutional logics of the organization, many of which are in tension, and the role of the public servant in these.

In these rich, varied and often amusing accounts of the representation of public servants, the reader will see why it is important to analyze the representation of public servants in the public. In education and research, such analysis can both help us understand our theories and models of public service, but also reveal how the public themselves understand public servants. In a world where representations in the public sphere are becoming more complex and our public servants themselves are actively blurring the lines between reality and fiction, it is arguable that the analysis of the representation of public servants in our public culture is more pressing than ever.

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