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"UNDER PRESSURE"

A study of the Swedish Public Health Agency's crisis, - and reputation management during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This study examines the Swedish Public Health Agency's (PHA) crisis communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic during the year of 2020. Departing from a synthesis of the frameworks of *Image Repair Theory* and *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory,* the PHA's online press conferences are critically analyzed to map out how the PHA's representatives react to *reputational threats* that occur alongside and in connection to its management of the crisis at hand. With reputational threats is meant *allegations* or *incidents* that risk shedding a negative light on the organization in question. The aim is to explore the applicability of said frameworks in a new empirical, crisis communicative context, but also to contribute to the understanding of what role reputational concerns play in public organizations' crisis communication; an aspect that I argue has been overlooked in the crisis communication-literature. Departing from a definition of reputational threats as either *criticism* (where the PHA have been publicly questioned or criticized) or *acts of reversal* (where something seemingly changes in the PHA's approach), five situations and six corresponding press conferences are selected for examination.

A rhetorical analysis based on the logic of accusation (*kategoria*) and defense (*apologia*) finds several instances of what can be classified as verbal defense-strategies in the PHA's crisis communication, but also interesting variations depending on *what* the threat is about or *where* it comes from. The PHA's only constant reaction across press conferences is found to be *initial silence:* to wait until the issue at hand is brought up by someone else (in this case, a journalist participating at the press conference). The insights of this study pose challenges to current scholarly understandings of crisis communication within the public sector and showcase opportunities for future studies of the same.

Keywords: COVID-19, crisis communication, societal crisis, public organizations, public agencies, reputation, reputational threat, Image Repair Theory, IRT, Bureaucratic Reputation Theory, BRT, rhetorical analysis, rhetorical criticism, kategoria, apologia.

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Foreword

On New Year's Eve 2019, I was having dinner with my parents and my best friend. We discussed the fact that said friend - freshly graduated from nursing school – had just gotten the job as a nurse at the local and "*relatively calm*" infection clinic.

- "*That's nice, but if we ever get struck by a pandemic or something, you will be busy*", my dad joked.

-"*Yeah*", my friend replied, laughingly, "*let's hope that never happens, shall we!*"

Oh, how right she was.

This thesis – written in the spring of 2021 – marks the final of the two-year master's program in political communication at the University of Gothenburg. It came about in a turbulent, uncertain and scary time which will leave its mark on me and the world forever. However, turbulent and scary is in its own way also interesting; experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic has wakened a strong desire within me to understand what happens to societies, their institutions and their different actors when everything is, seemingly, turned upside-down.

But before we get to that, some acknowledgements are in order:

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from the bottom of my heart – *thank you.*

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1. Introduction

The clock turns two. The camera zooms in on his face, close-up. The press, together with hundreds of thousands of people at home are watching from their computers. Eagerly waiting for him to start. Then – just like he did yesterday and possibly also the day before that – he clears his throat and begins with the usual;

"*Welcome. We start by taking a look at the global situation which continues to be severe*."

1.1 Point of departure

Humanity currently finds itself knee-deep in a large and all-encompassing crisis. The spread of the novel coronavirus SARS-COV-2 was declared a global pandemic by WHO on the 11th of March 2020 (WHO 2020) and has since then held most of the world in a tight grip. Large-scaled crises that beset the public domain require management (Boin et al. 2017,7). Citizens whose lives are affected by it expect their public leader-figures to do their utmost to keep them out of harm's way, make critical decisions and provide direction even in the most difficult of circumstances (ibid.). In Sweden, the responsibility to manage the COVID-19 pandemic has first and foremost fallen on the Public Health Agency (PHA), which has put large emphasis on direct communication with the public and media via regular and live-streamed press conferences.

The man referred to in the prosaic scenario above was the PHA's State Epidemiologist *Anders Tegnell*, who has become a central character during said press conferences and followingly in Sweden's COVID-19 management at large (Haidl & Svenberg 2020; Ahlcrona & Granström 2021,64). The press conferences have been called "*a medial campfire*" for Swedes to gather around as a point of stability in an otherwise uncertain time (Truedson & Johansson 2021,8). For some people they have worked as a source of information, for some as a source of comfort, and for others as a source of frustration (ibid.). Notwithstanding, this rather unusual tactic has rewarded the PHA and its representatives a long-running presence in the public eye and a role as front-figures of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy (Dahl 2021a).
This study will be devoted to examining the opportunities and challenges included in that role. More specifically, it takes an interest in the obligation of certain public organizations to manage and communicate about externally caused societal crises and how that interplays with their possibilities or efforts to maintain a profitable reputation.

1.2 Problematization

Within crisis communication-literature, a distinction is commonly made between *societal* crises and *trust*-crises, which are generally also associated with different communicative practices (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,10). Although the boundaries between the two different communication-types in question are sometimes described as porous (Olsson & Falkheimer 2014,6), it is seemingly unclear when and how they overlap.

Trust-crises are "*man-made*" and occur when actors become subject of actual or expected criticism that risks having negative consequences for their reputation, and in extension economic or political capital (Odén et al. 2016,27; Frandsen & Johansen 2017,10). With reputation, or image (terms which will here be used interchangeably), means the impression others have of a person or organization that develops out of what it says and does (Benoit 2015,305). Trust-crises are normally connected to what can be called *organizational* crisis communication. Theoretical approaches describing actors' attempts at restoring their reputation after such crises are the best known and classical of the field (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420). The key theories in this category, mainly *Image Repair Theory* (IRT), are based on apologetic discourse; the art of rhetorically defending one's position (ibid.; Ware & Linkugel 1973,273).

Societal crises, on the other hand, occur in connection to externally caused, severe threats against basic humanitarian values (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,10). They are connected to the kind of communication embedded in the instruction of certain public organizations (Frandsen & Johansen 2020,62), with the main function to offer the public all the information and meaning it needs to cope with the situation as efficiently as possible (ibid.; Olsson & Eriksson 2020,419). In general, the challenges and rationale of public organizations' crisis communication are assumed to go beyond ambitions related to the reputation-oriented ditto (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420; Horsley 2006,16). It is described as a more complex practice, restricted by regulations and driven by an obligation toward the public good, why reputational concerns are deemed to be secondary (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,96; Horsley 2006,16). In this study I will argue that as a result of that the focus in current research has lied on describing what makes this kind of crisis communication different from the organizational type, the reputational aspect of it has to all appearances *been overlooked.*

This is a both academically and socially relevant observation for several reasons.
First of all, there are multiple ways of understanding public organizations' behaviors and motivations. For example, one of the central tenets of *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* is that public organizations' behavior is to a large extent driven by a desire to avoid, - or protect themselves from *reputational threats*; challenges to one or more aspects of their public image (reputation management) (Rimkutë 2020,388; Moschella & Pinto 2019,517; Maor 2020,1046). This theory does not distinguish between crisis and "*normality*". Moreover, societal crises are full of pitfalls that risk damaging the public perception of the organization responsible for managing it. Not only must crucial decisions be made while time is short, stakes are high and the public interest is intense, mistakes can lead to strong criticism (Boin et al. 2017,70;87). If a strategy in some aspect fails, the responsible actors come under severe pressure; forced to defend themselves against accusations of incompetence, ignorance, or insensitivity (ibid.,8).

Finally, in order to be efficient, public crisis communicators are completely dependent upon public trust (ibid.,78). Public trust is determined partly by the quality of the crisis communication itself (and there are studies, theoretical frameworks or best-practice accounts for how to adequately speak to the press and public about a societal crisis in order to be perceived as trustworthy in terms of successful framing, timing, transparency, and empathy) (ibid.,77; CDC 2018). However, it is reasonably *also* determined by how the communicator handles various reputational threats that occur along the way. Nevertheless, there is surprisingly little to read about how a crisis managing public organization acts or communicates to protect itself from, or prevent, such reputational pitfalls. Here, I mean that there is a knowledge-gap to be filled. I want to figure out whether it might be so that public organizations that communicate in a crisis can, or must, focus on both their mission as crisis managers *and* maintaining their reputation at the same time. Describing and classifying reputational defense-strategies is the typical function of classical *apologia-based theories* (Frandsen & Johansen 2015,105), but to my knowledge they have thus far only been applied to cases of outright trust-crises and not to communication regarding external, societal crises. Against this background, this study aims to explore the dynamics of public crisis communication from a yet unexplored angle and examine whether, and if so how, public organizations react to reputational threats that present themselves alongside and in connection to their ongoing crisis management.

1.2.1 Selected case

For the above stated purpose, I deem the Swedish PHA's management of the COVID-19 pandemic to be a particularly suitable case to study. First, because of the format of (one part of) its crisis communication; the press conferences allow for the analysis of reputation management "*in action*". Second, because of the longevity of the crisis in question, enabling a study of the PHA's behavior in several different situations where its reputation is arguably brought to its head. Third, because the Swedish PHA makes a unique element in the history of the COVID-19 pandemic. Partly due to its role as a front-figure with little interference of the Government. Partly due to the controversies that its strategy has sparked both domestically and abroad (Davies & Roeber 2021; Paterlini 2020).

1.2.2 Analytical purpose and research questions

The analytical purpose of this study can be divided into three overlapping aims. First, to examine how the Swedish Public Health Agency has handled its role as front figure in Sweden's COVID-19 strategy. More specifically, to find indicators of "*double focus*" in the PHA's communicative output where it is simultaneously fulfilling its mission as crisis manager *and* addressing threats to its organizational reputation. Second, to explore the applicability of classical apologia-based theories (more specifically, *Image Repair Theory*) in a societal crisis communication setting. And third, examine the utility of *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* for analyzing an aspect of public organizations' crisis communication that has previously been overlooked in the literature; the *reputational*.

To achieve this, my study will be guided by the following overarching research question:

- *How does the Swedish Public Health Agency rhetorically address reputational threats in its communication about the COVID-19 pandemic?*

And, presuming any such efforts can be identified:

RQ1: *In what situations does the PHA address reputational threats?*

RQ2: *What strategies are used?*

RQ3: *What kind of threats provoke a response from the PHA?*

These rather broad questions will be specified further down in this study when its theoretical and methodological frameworks have been presented to the reader.

1.3 Disposition

This thesis consists of 10 chapters. First, I will provide the reader with the necessary background information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic as a global crisis and the Swedish Public Health Agency's role in managing it. After that, I will place the study in its academic context by highlighting what I define as a gap in current crisis communication-literature. This is followed by a presentation of the study's two theoretical frameworks; IRT and BRT, where I point out how they complement each other in this particular case. The fifth chapter is devoted to motivating the methodological choices of path, as well as defining the rhetorical concepts necessary to both conduct and understand the following analysis. Most importantly; accusation (*kategoria*) and defense (*apologia*). Then, in chapter 6, I describe and motivate the study's selection of material; the press conferences. In the analysis-chapter, the study's analytical procedure is demonstrated in terms of how the empirical material has been approached, deconstructed and reflected upon according to the logic of kategoria and apologia. In the following results-chapter, I summarize the observations made in the analysis in larger tendencies and patterns, and discuss them systematically with help of the theoretical frameworks and in accordance to the above posed research questions. This will ultimately lead to form the study's conclusions and serve as a basis for a following discussion with suggestions for future research.

2. Background

2.1 Introduction

A crisis is usually said to contain three key components; threat, uncertainty and urgency (Boin et al. 2017,2). By now, I deem it quite uncontroversial to claim that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates all three. The outbreak is believed to have originated late 2019 in the city of Wuhan, Hubei Province, China and it was declared a pandemic by WHO on March 11th, 2020. Since then, COVID-19 has spread to every continent except Antarctica (UNDP 2021). At present, Mid-May 2021, SARS-CoV-2 has infected more than 160 million people globally and more than 3 million people have died with the disease (JHU 2021). Those numbers, which are ever increasing, makes it one of the deadliest pandemics in history (Piper 2021).

2.2 COVID-19

COVID-19 is an infectious, respiratory disease caused by a newly discovered virus known as Severe Acute Respiratory Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (Machhi et al. 2020,359). SARS-CoV-2 belongs to the same viral family as the deadlier[1] SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV, but has resulted in considerably larger social penetration and mortality (ibid.). This is believed to arise from a greater potential of SARS-CoV-2 to spread through asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic carriers (ibid.,360). Current evidence suggests that the main way for the virus to spread from person-to-person is via close-range contact as it travels through exhalation air in aerosols (WHO 2021a). Many aspects of COVID-19 are however still unknown or debated. Despite intensive research there are currently few working therapeutic options against it (Machhi et al. 2020,361). The insight that close human proximity accelerates the viral spread of COVID-19 has instead actualized preventive, non-therapeutic measures including large-scaled physical distancing, face covering, contact tracing and movement restrictions or "*lockdowns*" (Sanche et al. 2020,1476). However, there is no consensus regarding the efficiency of the various measures. The global spread of COVID-19 has generated a plethora of understandings of how it ought to be contained and what measures ought to be implemented to do so (Ulfvarson 2020).

[1] If measured by case fatality rate (CFR) (Machhi et al. 2020,360-361).

What is more, the COVID-19 pandemic is more than a health crisis; it is also an unprecedented socio-economic crisis, striking every country it touches with devastating and longstanding effects. Each measure to slow down the transmission have profound costs on individuals, communities and societies as they bring social and economic life to a near stop (WHO 2021b). Millions of lives and several years of global socio-economic development are claimed to have been lost during the pandemic only due to the restrictions (SVT Nyheter 2021). That said, one thing with this virus is at least certain; it poses tough challenges and impossible prioritizations to those responsible for managing it.

2.2.1 Sweden and COVID-19

The Swedish constitution guarantees citizens free movement in times of peace (SFS 1974:152 chap. 2, 8 § (RF)) and thus prohibits any form of curfews or imposed social distancing during a pandemic, like those implemented in most other countries in connection to COVID-19 (Jonung & Nergelius 2020). Moreover, there is no special Swedish law for crisis management outside wartime (Andersson & Aylott 2020,7)[2]. Instead, the strategy builds on the Swedish *Communicable Diseases Act* (SFS 2004:168) which regulates the possibility to impose measures against diseases classified as a danger to public health and society. Also, this law states that although each and every one – *infected or not* – have a responsibility to avoid contributing to spread, all response-measures implemented must be based on voluntarism to the extent possible (SOU 2020:80,133).

Consequently, Sweden has adopted a "*trust-based*" approach (as in the state's trust in the individual), built on recommendations and pleads to voluntary compliance, to tackle COVID-19 (Dahl 2021b; Paterlini 2020). So far on, society has remained *relatively* open, with restaurants and shops more or less still in business and authorities relying on voluntary responsibility, social distancing, and work from home (Paterlini 2020). These aspects of the Swedish strategy have sparked controversy (Davies & Roeber 2021). Critique has been voiced both domestically and internationally, not the least in connection to the relatively high numbers of infections and fatality compared to neighboring Scandinavian countries (ibid.).

[2] Noted should be that a new, contemporary "*COVID-19 Act*" was passed by the Swedish Parliament and came into force on January 8th 2021. This act grants the Government capacity to independently implement binding infection control measures that otherwise can only be made in times of war (Government Offices 2021b).

However, the efficiency or otherwise of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy is not the subject of this study. This section is merely meant to provide the reader with an awareness of the conditions that set the framework for the strategy that it communicates *about*.

2.3 The Swedish Public Health Agency

The following section of this study will be devoted to describing the PHA, its mission and its role in the Swedish response against COVID-19.

2.3.1 What is the PHA?

The national responsibility for all various public health issues in Sweden lies on the PHA (Government Offices 2021a). From its governmental instruction follows that the PHA should, on a *scientific basis*, promote good public health by a) generating and communicating knowledge, b) developing health-related practices or strategies, and c) monitoring the Swedish public's overall health status and its determinants. This accounts for everything from mental health, to tobacco-consumption, to children's vaccinations (PHA 2020a).
Moreover, the PHA has an identity as an *expert agency* regarding infection control with one foot in the clinical and scientific frontline, whose mission it is to provide others with accurate information and knowledge (SFS 2013:1020, 10 §; PHA 2021a). "*Expert agency*" or "*knowledge agency*" are titles used to describe the PHA in the public debate (see, for example Örstadius et al. 2020; Hambraeus Bonnevier 2020) and by the PHA itself (PHA 2015;2021a).

2.3.2 The PHA and COVID-19

According to its governmental instruction, as well as the "*Responsibility Principle*" of Swedish public crisis management[3], it falls on the PHA to provide expert-support and organize the national preparation or response to potential outbreaks of infectious diseases (MSB 2018,24; SFS 2013:1020, 10 §). Adding to that, Sweden's public administration system follows a logic of extensive delegation which grants Swedish agencies *wide-ranging independence* within their respective jurisdictions and areas of expertise (Jonung & Nergelius 2020). A substantive amount of agency autonomy is also protected in the Swedish constitution (SFS 1974:152 chap. 12, 2 § (RF)), which prohibits interference of the legislative

[3] That the agency responsible for an activity in normal situations have a corresponding responsibility in the event of a societal disturbance (MSB 2018,24).

as well as executive power on any level in agency policy implementation, thereby banning any form of so-called ministerial rule (Government Offices 2015).

Consequentially, the PHA holds the central role in Sweden's strategy against COVID-19 (SOU 2020:80,151), which has to a large extent been shaped by the agency itself with little governmental interference (ibid.). The functions of the PHA's COVID-19 management can be summarized in terms of three highly intertwined key activities;

1. To follow the development of the pandemic in terms of epidemiological statistics, knowledge about the virus, vaccines and the like in Sweden and globally (SOU 2020:80,151).

2. To, based on this and in accordance with the Communicable Diseases Act, take or suggest actions to mitigate spread and minimize disease, mortality and other negative consequences for the individual and society (PHA 2019b,19). The PHA therefore presents to the public "*general advice*" (voluntary guidelines for how one can act to fulfil certain laws that are actualized during a pandemic) and "*recommendations*" (guidelines unconnected to any binding law, but based on the gathered knowledge on a certain matter and according to the agency a good idea to follow) (PHA 2021b).

3. To communicate all of the above to the general public and press. The PHA coordinates all communicative efforts made on a regional or local level, and has lead responsibility for all COVID-19 related informational output that applies nation-wide (PHA 2019a,20).
As mentioned, apart from using various online platforms, the PHA has mainly communicated via frequent and livestreamed *press conferences,* where citizens and the media are provided with continuous updates (Dahl 2021a).

The PHA's completion of the third activity, which can be said to function both as an activity in its own right and an output of the other two, shall also strive to maintain the public confidence in the agency, it's judgement and it messages; a prerequisite for the public to take the situation seriously and follow recommendations (2019a,11). However, embedded in this activity lies several pitfalls or potential conflicts.

First, speed and accuracy rarely travel well together (Boin et al. 2017,110). During a crisis, all facts are not known – that is part of the very concept (ibid.). This means that the PHA time and again risks facing situations where necessary knowledge about the virus or what is best

for society as a whole is limited. Followingly, messages and decisions might have to be based on prognoses that may or may not prove to be faulty later on, which in turn may spark criticism or anger.

Second, a pandemic is per definition a global event that requires response from numerous countries at the same time and thus enables comparisons. As Sweden's strategy has stood out internationally in its courses of action, that arguably puts the PHA's judgement in the spotlight.

Third, the stakes are high. All measures against COVID-19 have a price that individuals or society must pay in terms of lost jobs, restricted freedom or just inconvenience. Mistakes may result in death. Followingly, actions taken – or a perceived lack of the same – may create feelings of frustration or injustice that make people want to "*shoot the messenger*" which in this case is the PHA.

2.3 Summary

In this chapter I have aimed to put the reader into context regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the PHA's role in it. In the next chapter I will instead discuss what is known about public organizations' crisis communication in general (and what remains to be found out) in a literature review.

3. Literature review

3.1 Introduction

I introduced this study by pointing out crisis-mandated public organizations' reactions to reputational threats as an overlooked aspect in the crisis communication-literature. To accentuate this alleged knowledge-gap, I will in this chapter present and reflect upon previous research on public organizations' crisis communication and its view on the concept of reputation. The aim is that the (not exhaustive list of) research-examples will serve to frame the scholarly discourse in which I want to place the present study in a representative way, and make explicit its rationale.

3.2 Reputation in public crisis communication

There are several studies investigating how public organizations practice crisis communication to protect or repair their reputation in connection to *trust-crises;* how actors defend their image after internal scandals or misdeeds is the most classic and prominent form of crisis communication-studies (Olsson 2020,420). As mentioned, these studies as a rule depart from the rhetorical notion of *apologia*; the art of defending a position, which also forms the basis for key theories in the field, such as Image Repair Theory or Ethical Apologia (ibid.). Swedish examples include Falkheimer and Palm's (2005) analytical overview of how Swedish public organizations communicate when accused of wrongdoing, or Vigsø's (2013) rhetorical analysis of the 2005 medial storm around the Migration Board.

There are also studies, theoretical frameworks or best-practice accounts for how to communicate adequately as manager of a *societal* crisis to maintain public trust, where good reputation then follows as a consequence. Boin et al. (2017) discuss crisis communication in the public sector[4] in terms of *meaning making* (70). They point out practical factors such as preparedness or coordination of outgoing information, and symbolic factors such as proportionate, well-timed messages, honesty and successful framing (ibid.,77;92), as criteria for trust-inducing and thus effective crisis communication efforts. Other examples come from the closely related field of emergency management, most relevant here being CERC – (the Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication-model) developed and published by the CDC

[4] Although they mainly focus on the political aspects of crisis communication and followingly on the Government as crisis communicator.

(Center for Disease Control and Prevention – the US' answer to the PHA). It is intended for public health response officials and proposes guidelines to achieve the most efficient and trustworthy crisis communication in connection to health crises (CDC 2018,2). The way to trustworthiness, according to CERC, consists of six steps; being first, being right, being credible, expressing empathy, promoting action, and showing respect (ibid.).

What is missing, however, are studies of how an organization with responsibility for managing and communicating around *societal crises* handle accusations of wrongdoings or other threats to image that occur *alongside* or *in connection to* performing that task.
I localize one potential explanation in the literature for why this may be in the alleged "*corporate bias*" of crisis communication-research, and what seems to be its following counter-reaction.

3.3 The "corporate bias" of crisis communication and its response

The research and theorizations regarding public organizations' crisis communication is relatively scarce (Fredriksson et al. 2014,65; Einwiller & Laufer 2020,339; Olsson 2014,113; Olsson & Eriksson 2020,419). Crisis communication as a practice and discipline originally stems from the private sector in PR, - or management research (Odén et al. 2016,27). As a result, the majority of its theories are designed with corporations in mind (Horsley 2006,13; Olsson & Eriksson 2020,419; Boin et al. 2017,70). This "*corporate bias*" (Horsley 2006,5) has been noted by various scholars during the last two decades who in sum can be said to point out two main problems with it.

First, existing studies of public organizations' crisis communication and public relations in general is claimed to have been dominated by a tendency to, without further discussion or reflection, apply theories and models tailored for the institutional logic of the private sector onto studies of the public sector without sufficient attention to the distinctive natures of the two (Liu & Horsley 2007,378; Olsson & Falkheimer 2014,11; Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420).

The second problem, which is a prerequisite for the first, is that the practices, challenges and rationale of public organizations' crisis communication are deemed to be more complex than that of their private counterparts. This has been discussed in practical terms, for example in bureaucratic regulations and obligations to serve the public good, that limit communicative creativity (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,421; Frandsen & Johansen 2020,64). It has also been

discussed in terms of responsibility; although public organizations occasionally must handle self-inflicted problems with scandals or misdeeds, they are *also* occasionally legally responsible for managing external crises that primarily risks harming a community, societal sector, or nation rather than the organization itself. This responsibility is assumed to pose communicative challenges to public organizations that "*go beyond ambitions related to reputation-oriented crisis communication*" (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,421. See also; Horsley 2006,12-27; Frandsen & Johansen 2020,62-64; Benoit 2020,112). As a result, currently dominating theorizations of crisis communication are deemed insufficient to describe the operational environment and practices of the public sector. This has seemingly generated a counter-reaction in a number of efforts to develop theoretical frameworks designed to take into account and describe the distinguishing features of the public kind of crisis communication. In the following, a few examples of such attempts will be presented[5].

3.3.1 Odén et al. (2016)

The research project *Crisis Communication 2.0* (my translation, Odén et al. 2016), aims at increasing the understanding of the digitization's impact on crisis communication, demonstrates the advantages of applying a *citizens-perspective* to crisis communication when studying societal crises. Meaning that citizens' needs, empowerment and long-term resilience during societal crises are in focus rather than single organizations' interests, as during trust-crises (27). Studying the experiences of five large societal crises in Sweden through web-surveys and focus-groups for each crisis, the project analyses how different actors reason and act when a crisis emerges in the era of social media and decentralized information in relation the assumption that the public's interest is in focus (ibid.,10).

3.3.2 Horsley (2006;2010)

An early attempt to explain the unique environmental characteristics of the public sector and "*suggest a new paradigm for research*"[6] apart from the private sector is found in the Crisis Adaptive Public Information-model (CAPI), developed by American scholar S.J Horsley

[5] Noted should be that this concerns only one part of the literature of public organizations' crisis communication. Other scholars have, for instance, focused on social media as a platform both for crises and for crisis communication. Examples include Johansson and Odén (2018), who investigate how Swedish public agency officials perceive the power relation to the media in crisis communication in the time of digitization, or Austin et al. (2011) and their social-mediated crisis communication (SMCC)- model.

[6] Horsley (2006,3;12).

(2006). Horsley departs from the notion that predominant theories of crisis communication, as well as public administration-research, lack the terminology necessary to study the management of large-scaled public crises that exceeds the boundaries, and disrupt routine operations, of any one organization (2006,7;20).

Building on the results of a participant observation study at an American state emergency management agency (SEMA) and in-depth interviews with SEMA-communications-employees (ibid.,66), CAPI is designed to describe the communicative function of public organizations with a crisis mandate (Horsley 2010,561). Horsley suggests that crisis-mandated agencies work and communicate differently in times of normalcy than they do in times of crisis (ibid.,556). The differences are so significant that the organizations in question are best described as having two distinct modes; one "*routine mode*" and one normally latent "*crisis mode*", which come with their own distinct structures, priorities, and goals (ibid.). According to Horsley, the most prominent, distinguishing feature of public crisis communication that predominant models fail to describe is its priorities of serving the public good (2006,16). An agency in "*crisis-mode*" – bound to its mission to protect lives and property – has as its sole focus to inform and educate the public so that they can make good decisions about their own welfare (ibid.,21). Any self-oriented interests of profitability, blame-avoidance or reputation management are described as "*antithetical*" to the concerns of organizations communicating with the public during a societal crisis (ibid.,16).

However, the CAPI-model is based on an observed response to a *simulated disaster-practice* (2006,65), has (to my knowledge) not been tested further, and is thus built on a limited amount of empirical evidence. Moreover, not all scholars in the field seem to share Horsley's view of reputation-oriented ambitions and a public-safety focus as *completely* incompatible. Other conceptualizations of public organizations' crisis communication seemingly, to a varying extent, acknowledge the presence of both.

3.3.3 Frandsen & Johansen (2009)

Frandsen and Johansen have been described as the leading researchers of crisis communication in the public sector (Coombs 2020,991), and their study of Danish municipalities from 2009 as a seminal work (ibid.; Olsson 2014,121). This study departs from neo-institutionalism, where organizations and their activities are regarded as embedded in and shaped by their institutional environments (Frandsen & Johansen 2009,104). Based on in-

depth interviews complemented with archival studies of websites and crisis-preparedness documents, it aims to provide a sense of how Danish officials approach crisis management and crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen 2009,107). The scholars distinguish among their interviewees' experiences two institutional logics. First, a less anchored, "*corporate-like*" crisis management-logic concerning image and reputation management, which is not limited to societal crises (ibid.,113). Second, a public sector-unique, event-oriented emergency-logic, which adheres to classical public service principles of disaster management (ibid.,114).

3.3.4 Frandsen & Johansen (2020)

In a more recent application of neo-institutionalism, Frandsen and Johansen (2020) further accentuate the characteristics particular to public organizations that communicate in crises when suggesting a division of the field of crisis communication into three respective, but overlapping *subfields;* public-, corporate-, and political (2020,59). By subfield is meant a specific set of crisis-related tasks which are performed by specific groups of actors within specific sectors of society and, followingly, governed by specific institutional logics (ibid.,62). *Public crisis communication* – distinguished from the *corporate* respective *political* ditto – is defined as the tasks included in the formal mission of certain governmental bodies to protect lives and property when a crisis of societal scale breaks out (ibid.). The distinguishing characteristic of public crisis communication, according to Frandsen and Johansen, is that it is performed in the public sector with all its consequences in terms of regulation and financing and an obligation to serve the public good. The role of reputation in public crisis communication is not explicitly described. The scholars define public crisis communication as primarily driven by a focus on ensuring *public safety* and less so by political or monetary self-interest (ibid.,64), but they also emphasize that the different logics of each subfield are not mutually exclusive but overlapping (ibid.,59).

3.3.5 Fredriksson (2014)

Another advocacy for the neo-institutional approach and for taking the social and structural conditions into account when analyzing crisis communication can be found in Fredriksson's (2014) analysis of Swedish governmental agencies' response to the 2008 financial crisis. Based on in-depth interviews and written materials (321), Fredriksson finds that crises mobilize three kinds of communicative activities ("*providing, policing and routinizing"*

(ibid.,319)). These serve to both safeguard the interests of individual citizens, maintain the reputation of the own organization and maintain stability of the financial market as a whole. However, the focus on the latter is found to be prioritized (ibid.,325;335). Thus, while previous research has mainly studied crisis communication as an activity connected to one specific organization, Fredriksson finds that it can serve several purposes simultaneously, including to preserve the trustworthiness of an entire societal sector.

3.3.6 Olsson (2014)

Olsson (2014) constructs a typology of crisis communication specific for public organizations, with two axes comprising *strategic* versus *operational*, - respective *reputation-oriented* versus *resilience-oriented* (117). These dimensions create four ideal types of communication which are exemplified through a study of the Queensland flood-crisis 2010-2011 (ibid.,114). Among the "*reputation-oriented*" types, Olsson distinguishes between the operational communication that mainly concerns providing citizens with necessary information but *can* be reputation-oriented because it, if handled well, boosts the communicator's image as a side effect of openness and competence (ibid.,119), and the "*classical*", strategic communication that primarily concerns improving or repairing an image (ibid.,120). The latter is in this case illustrated by how Queensland's tourism-department and universities engaged in "*aggressive marketing*" to attract traffic to unaffected areas after the flood-crisis (ibid.). In other words; attempts at repairing an externally caused damage to image of a whole city, rather than of the own organization. However, Olsson does not explain how the different ideal-types relate to one another or interplay. Since each type is illustrated with the practices of a different actor, it remains unclear whether the respective practices should be perceived as overlapping or incompatible.

3.4 Summary – framing the alleged knowledge-gap

The studies cited above have all made important contributions to increase the understanding of the specific and complex, but understudied nature of societal crises and the challenges facing the organizations obliged to manage them. By proposing theoretical frameworks specifically designed for the public sector, their authors accentuate the importance of taking structural and organizational context into account when studying crisis communication. However, while the focus so far has lied on drawing theoretical boundaries between societal crises and trust-crises, *less* focus has seemingly been granted to investigating and describing how the two are alike or when their practices overlap.

The majority of the frameworks presented acknowledge that public organizations' crisis communication can serve multiple purposes, but have focused on demonstrating how reputation-oriented ambitions only make *one* by highlighting other aspects that are unique to the more complex nature of public crisis communication as opposed to the organizational kind. As a result, activities that are tightly bound to the classic literature of trust-crises – including how organizations handle critique or threats to their reputation – remain understudied, and the applicability of the frameworks used to analyze such activities in other contexts remains untried.

On that note, a second explanation for this arises in what appears to be a *normative* assumption traceable in several of the studies presented, but also within the crisis communication-literature at large. Namely of public crisis communication as first and foremost driven by serving the public's interest (Odén et al. 2016; Horsley 2006;2010; Frandsen & Johansen 2020;2009; Olsson 2014; Odén et al. 2016), or to maintain order in the sector for which the communicator is responsible (Fredrikson 2014; Olsson 2014), and that any self-interests are secondary. In other words, that public organizations – first and foremost bound to rules, regulations and their obligation to serve the public good – *should* not mix self-interests such as reputation-management with their crisis communication (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420). If not always, then at least not during crises, where focus should lie on ensuring that their communication is both effective and legitimate and good reputation should follow as a side-effect (ibid.; Olsson 2014,119; Boin et al., 2017,70; CDC 2018).

From this point of view, image repair-discourse, public crisis communication and their corresponding theories have seemingly come to be understood as distinguished from one another, and as belonging to different crisis contexts and different communicative practices (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95; Benoit 2020,112). This despite that, as was established earlier in this study, engaging in crisis communication on a societal level is a risk-filled activity full of reputation-threatening pitfalls. Equally acknowledged is that it is crucial for an actor engaging in such crisis communication to maintain a profitable reputation for it to be efficient. From that notion follows the question whether it logically should not be so that public organizations that engage in crisis communication do, or *must*, focus on both aspects at the same time.

It is against this background that I aim to fill a current knowledge-gap and do something new by studying how a public organization manages and protect its reputation in a societal crisis communication context. Having placed it in its academic context, this study's theoretical framework will be presented next.

4. Theoretical framework

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will be devoted to presenting the study's two theoretical frameworks; *Image Repair Theory* (IRT) and *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* (BRT), which both concern how organizations adapt their behavior according to perceived threats in their external environment to keep up public appearances, but in different ways. Below, their key concepts, assumptions and claims will be presented respectively. Ultimately, I will point out where the two theories seemingly connect and complement one another, and argue that they together provide a promising, conceptual foundation and structure for this particular study and its forthcoming analysis.

4.2 Image Repair Theory (IRT)

IRT is a typology of communicative defense-strategies that social actors can use in a crisis-situation to repair an image that has been, or might be, damaged (Benoit 2020,110). The framework was developed by William L. Benoit with the aim to provide a tool for describing what an organization or individual says and how it says it when forced to defend itself communicatively against accusations (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,93;95). IRT is today one of the most important, well-tried and influential approaches within the field of crisis communication (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95; Vigsø 2016,42)[7]. The most comprehensive exposé of IRT can be found in Benoit's 1995 book "*Accounts, Excuses and Apologies*", and in the second, complemented edition from 2015. However, I will here mainly be referring to Benoit's own review of IRT from 2020 as it, to my knowledge, offers the most updated summary of the theory and its current status.

[7] The other main theories in this category are usually considered to be Keith Hearit's Terminological Control Theory which concerns *corporate* apologia specifically and Apologetic Ethics. The latter assesses and gives normative advice concerning the ethical value of an apologia (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,102-104; Vigsø 2016,46). Since I study a public agency and take no interest in rating how ethical its communicative output is, IRT is arguably more appropriate to use here.

4.2.1 IRT and the concept of image

Image refers to the impression others have of a person or organization, and develops out of what it says and does, as well as by what others say about it (Benoit 2015,305). Benoit indiscriminately uses the terms *image, ethos, face,* and *reputation* (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,96).

4.2.2 IRT and its foundations

IRT is a so-called *classical* crisis communication-theory of how actors communicate to protect their reputation (Olsson 2020,420). It is a rhetorical and textual research tradition (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95) and builds on a combination of concepts from sociology (accounts and excuses) and rhetoric (apologetic discourse) (Benoit 2020,105). Moreover, IRT rests upon two axiomatic assumptions regarding communication and image, where the second presupposes the first. First, communication is *goal-oriented*. Second, the key goal is maintaining a *good reputation,* which is deemed valuable because it provides an actor with influence (2020,106). Therefore, threats to image are assumed to necessitate a defensive response. Such threats, means Benoit, are "*inevitable and frequent"* because resources are scarce and their allocation may trigger frustration among stakeholders, because circumstances beyond one's control can keep one from meeting obligations, and because people a) are imperfect, make errors, or say and do offensive things b) have different priorities or values, which provokes criticism of others (2020,106; 2015,303).

4.2.3 IRT and the image repair-strategies

The basic image repair-situation, which serves as the platform for the IRT-typology, is meant to erupt when an actor perceives its image as being under attack – threatened (is criticized or believes it is likely to be so) – and defends itself by means of one or more rhetorical strategies (Benoit 2020,106; Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95). Usually, but not exclusively, it concerns some form of undesirable event for which the actor is perceived or explicitly pointed out as responsible (which can be true or false, what matters is how it is *perceived* the actor in question and by its stakeholders (Benoit 2020,109)). Image repair often occurs in more complex situations than a single accusation followed by a single defense (ibid.,110). Moreover, later accounts of IRT also recognizes that actors can employ defense *before* an attack occurs, hoping to *"nip the crisis in the bud"* (ibid.). IRT thus acknowledges that an actor does not have to be the target of an explicit or ongoing attack to need image repair (Benoit 2015,304).

That said, the IRT-theory is as mentioned a typology which is mainly interested in describing *what* an actor says when it has to verbally defend itself and *how* it says it (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,93). The typology is derived from an understanding of attacks (or anticipated attacks) against an image as having two components; *blame* and *offensiveness.* A defense-strategy can therefore either deny both parts, dispute blame, dispute offensiveness, or concede any or both of them. This makes *five* general strategies, which in turn are divided into *eleven* subcategories (Benoit 2020,112). The strategies, which are supposed to make an exhaustive list of potential image repair-approaches and be the same regardless of what the accusation concerns (ibid.), constitute the cornerstone of IRT (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,97). A more thorough description of them will be given in the forthcoming methodology-chapter[8].

The IRT-typology has come to serve as both a theory and (to a somewhat lesser extent) as real-world crisis management-guidelines (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95). However, it should be said that in practice, this type of guidelines is seldom followed. For example, Mral (2013a,12) writes that although the crisis communication-literature usually (normatively) assumes the most efficient strategy for a communicator to be quickly and voluntarily admitting to any form of accusation before anyone else brings it up, the most common strategy – initially and over time – is to remain silent.

4.2.4 IRT and its limitations

IRT has its weaknesses. Critics have, for example, claimed that its simplistic language-use risks reducing the rather complex process of accusation and defense into a crude two-step-sequence (Burns & Bruner 2000). It has also been pointed out that the theory has not developed much since its coinage (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,96), and followingly that it needs to be adapted to the logic of social media-use during crises, which can potentially create new image management-issues but also new strategies (see, for example, Liu & Fraustino 2014). On the other hand, one of IRT's greatest strengths is that it has proved to be applicable to a wide variety of situations across sectors, times and cultures. Scholars have applied IRT to defensive discourse in a multitude of case-studies, in a wide variety of contexts. These include corporations, politics, sports, entertainment, the media, international relations, higher education, religion, and healthcare (Johansen 2017,99; Benoit 2020,112-113)[9]. Nevertheless, IRT has to my knowledge only been applied to contexts of organizational or individual trust-

[8] They can also be found in **Appendix 1.**
[9] For a very comprehensive list of studies, see Benoit (2020).

crises. Not to a societal crisis communication-setting. In fact, Benoit himself makes a distinction between image repair discourse and crisis communication, which he refers to as a *broader* category that includes image repair but also other crises, such as natural disasters, where the focus on image is allegedly less strong (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,95; Benoit 2020,112).

4.2.5 Summary

Image Repair Theory offers an established and seemingly widely applicable framework that can be used as a lens to analyze how actors defend themselves against different threats to their reputation. However, IRT is designed for, and has as far as I know only been applied to, *trust-crises* where the entire reason for the crisis communication at hand is some sort of reputational threat. Meanwhile, this study intends to take on a slightly different approach and search for a public organization's reactions to reputational threats that appear *alongside* and in *connection to* its communication surrounding another, external crisis. IRT offers little guidance for how that type of reputational threat may look, why that answer will have to be sought elsewhere. Moreover, in order to take the specific conditions for public organizations into consideration, I need to look for situations where *specifically* public organizations would perceive a need to defend their reputation. This is where *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* (BRT) makes its entrance.

4.3 Bureaucratic Reputation Theory (BRT)

The main claim of *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* (BRT) is that a significant share of the behavior of public organizations can be explained by an ambition to cultivate a profitable reputation (Carpenter and Krause 2012,28). The term bureaucratic reputation refers to "*a set of beliefs about an organization's capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences*" (ibid.,26). This definition was coined by Daniel P. Carpenter in the 2001 book *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy* that spells out the foundations of BRT, and has remained more or less undisputed in the literature ever since (Boon et al. 2021,428). In essence, BRT views the daily activities of public organizations as guided by two distinct concerns. The first is to accomplish that or those core tasks for which they are officially responsible, and that thus make out their very raison d'être as recipients of delegated political authority and power (Carpenter & Krause 2012,29). The second, disconnected from any formal obligations, is to ensure they are also *perceived* as successful at accomplishing those core tasks by their stakeholders (ibid.; Carpenter 2001,14). This idea of

dual organizational concerns differentiates BRT from classical principal-agent approaches to public administration, which only take into account the first, formal of the two, and thus depicts the practices of public organizations as solely determined by delegated responsibility, regulations and mechanisms for accountability (Busuioc & Lodge 2016a,247).

4.3.1 BRT and reputation management

Systematic and conscious efforts of a public organization – that go beyond any formal obligations and are at least partly motivated by their symbolic value – to cultivate a positive reputation, are known in BRT literature as *reputation management* (Christensen & Gornitzka 2018,888). Reputation management, put differently, serves to manage organizations' *appearances* in front of diverse stakeholders by persuasively demonstrating a capacity to fulfil external expectations (Maor et al. 2013,585; Busuioc & Lodge 2016a,249). Such strategic efforts have been identified to come in a variety of shapes, focus on long-term or short-term effects (Abolafia & Hatmaker 2013,548), and include both operative and communicative action (Busuioc & Rimkutë 2020,1266). The supposed rationale behind is an idea of a profitable reputation as a valuable political asset which can generate political or public support and, most importantly, *legitimacy* of an organization's role and activities (Busuioc & Lodge 2016a,249; Rimkutë 2020,388).

4.3.2 BRT and reputation

Similar to Benoit's definition of *image*, reputation is, according to BRT, generated by the organization in question but exists within the members of its external audience(s) (Carpenter & Krause 2012,26). Reputation is thus thought to function simultaneously as an asset and a force that in its own right guides organizations' behavior (ibid.,30, Abolafia & Hatmaker 2013,535). What is more, a public organization's reputation is described as constituting not one overarching whole, but *four* various reputational dimensions. Namely, the *performative* (does the organization do its job?), *moral* (does it protect the interests of the public or its clients?), *technical* (does it have the skills required?), and *procedural* (does it follow rules and norms?) (Carpenter & Krause 2012,27). These dimensions neither stay nor move in harmony but exist in a zero-sum relationship, forcing organizations to prioritize what to signal out externally (ibid.). This prioritization is thought to be guided either by the nature of the tasks linked to the own identity (as in what does the organization want to be "*known for*") (Boon et al. 2021,437; Busuioc & Lodge 2016b,93) or by the assessment of a perceived reputational *threat* (Maor 2020,1045).

4.3.3 BRT and reputational threats

One of the central tenets of BRT-scholarship is that public organizations' behavior is understood as partly driven by a desire to avoid, - or protect themselves from *reputational threats*; challenges to one or more aspects of their public image (Rimkutë 2020,388; Moschella & Pinto 2019,517; Maor 2020,1046). Reputational threats can be defined as *allegations* and/or *incidents* that in some way risk shedding negative light on the organization in question (Gilad et al. 2015,455; Busuioc & Lodge 2016b,93). As reputation lies within the audience, threats emerge when an organization's activities catch the public or political eye (Rimkutë 2020,393). Moreover, reputational threats can be either *explicit* or *implicit.* This is discussed by Moschella and Pinto (2019), who theorize that in order to cultivate and protect their reputations, public organizations are reluctant to expose themselves as *incompetent* (516). Thus, they have to avoid pitfalls that risk signaling that they are. One such pitfall is, according to Moschella and Pinto, so-called *acts of reversal;* taking back earlier announcements or policy paths (ibid.). The danger embedded in such actions lies in that they risk being perceived by the public or other stakeholders as that former comments or decisions were mistaken – calling the attention to the responsible organization's potential error and in extension its reaction functions, knowledge and competence (ibid.,517; see also Carpenter & Krause 2012,29). Threats can also differ in type or degree (as in more or less damaging (Gilad et al. 2015,453)) and can emerge from different audiences (Maor 2020,1046). Reputation management-efforts are meant to be crafted accordingly (Boon et al. 2021,437).

4.3.4 BRT and strategic communication

Communication is thought to be a fundamental reputation management-tool (Maor et al. 2013,454), yet the studies of communication in BRT-literature are relatively few (ibid.). Among the existing works, one share of scholars has focused on to what extent and how organizations communicate to position themselves against various reputational threats. Based on QCA's of articles commenting an Israeli banking regulator's (BSD) actions between 1996 and 2012 (n=118), Maor et al. (2013) and Gilad et al. (2015) study the BSD's responses to public expressions of opinion. Maor et al. (2013) find the BSD's choice of response to critique to be based on calculations of reputational costs; critique regarding aspects where its reputation is strong tends to be ignored, while aspects where the reputation is weaker generates a comment (582). Gilad et al. (2015) study not only the binary choice between silence and talk, but demonstrate that responses to critique also differ in type (silence,

problem denial, or problem admission) given the potential relative threat it poses to the organization (453). In a conceptual article, Busuioc and Lodge (2016b,95) also discuss this kind of "*selective responsiveness*" as a consequence of whether a threat concerns a "*core*" or "*noncore*" interest to the organization, suggesting that responses to reputational threats are shaped according to an understanding of the own organizational identity (what it wants to be "*known for*"). (See also Rimkutë (2020) on how the emphasis of different dimensions of reputation varies with threat, time and across EU-agencies, based on QCA of annual reports.)

Others have focused on communication as a preventive, rather than reactive, measure. For example, Moschella and Pinto (2019), who analyze speeches from the US Federal Bank Reserve System (Fed) 2006-2016 (n=689). By comparing *issue salience,* they find the Fed's communication to be guided by a desire to minimize reputational costs of so-called *acts of reversal* (changing policy-path or earlier announcements) (ibid.,516). This holds even in the presence of political restrains on the communicative agenda (ibid.,525). The findings indicate that public organizations use communication not only as a response to external critique or negative media coverage, but also take their own initiatives to prevent it from emerging.

4.3.5 BRT and limitations

Critics of BRT have argued that reputation management may be driven by media logic rather than by the nature of a threat or task (Maor 2020,1048). Others question the idea of communication as a form of reputation management, meaning it only provides short-term, superficial solutions to problems that at the end of the day is determined by "*real*" behavior (ibid., 1049). Another limitation in the existing literature is that previous studies of BRT and communication have relied almost exclusively on QCA of static material (news articles, websites, reports). Although QCA is well-suited for analyses of large amounts of data, it is also true that something fundamental is lost when text is translated into numbers and reduced to merely its manifest content (Karlsson & Johansson 2019,172). This absence of more in-depth studies is thought-provoking considering that the theory takes an interest in how communication can serve dual purposes, and arguably would benefit from a mapping-out of how those dynamics play out both explicitly but also in the more implicit kind of communication.

4.3.6 BRT and crisis communication

BRT is constructed to describe agencies' day-to-day behavior and does followingly not discriminate between normalcy and times of crisis. Christensen and Lægreid (2020) study the Norwegian public sector's management of the COVID-19 pandemic during spring 2020. Departing from the frameworks of BRT and meaning making, they claim that public organizations' desire to maintain a profitable reputation does not impact *less* on their behavior during crisis times than otherwise. Quite the opposite; such concerns, the authors mean, are *especially* salient during a crisis, where credibility is a crucial asset and public leaders must justify or argue for the measures taken (714). Based on a scrutiny of the main definitions and arguments presented by the political executive in daily government media-briefings, interviews and news articles, Christensen and Lægreid find several examples of reputation-managing efforts (ibid.,727). For example, the inter-organizational coordination of outward consensus (ibid.,725), the promotion of unifying slogans (ibid.,727), and the strategic emphasis on certain reputational dimensions as legitimizing means (ibid.,722).

4.3.7 Summary

The preceding chapter mentioned that existing literature of public organizations' crisis communication view reputational concerns as something down-prioritized or secondary; if not always than at least when a crisis strikes. According to me, Christensen and Lægreid's findings hint at a promising potential to use BRT as an *alternative* understanding of public organizations' behavior in crisis communicative contexts, where reputation is allowed a more prominent role. The study also accentuates the potential in exploring additional aspects of BRT in a crisis communication-context, such as conducting analyses of more in-depth, qualitative nature, and study the avoidance of or reaction to reputational threats; a concept which in current crisis communication-literature has been tightly linked to *organizational trust-crises* and thus, as argued, overlooked in studies and frameworks of public crisis communication.

4.4 IRT and BRT synthesized

In this chapter, I have presented the two frameworks of IRT and BRT, which both theorize around how organizations adapt their behavior according to perceived threats in their external environment to keep up public appearances, but in different ways. In this final section I will briefly clarify how these two schools each have their distinct value, but also complement one another other and can be synthesized to constitute a framework for the forthcoming analysis.

IRT is a so-called *classical* crisis communication theory that describes how actors engage in crisis communication to protect their reputation against perceived threats. In this study, the logic and typology of IRT can thus facilitate the identification and discussion of the PHA's potential response to such threats. However, IRT has been closely linked to organizational trust-crises in current literature and therefore offer less guidance for what may provoke the usage of its image repair-strategies in the context of *societal* crisis communication.
The BRT-framework, on the other hand, offers an understanding of what drives public organizations' behavior. It acknowledges that public organizations are driven by a "*double focus*"; partly fulfilling its official tasks and partly protecting its reputation from actual or potential threats, and that this is no different in crisis situations. The terminology of BRT thus enables the localization of potential reputational threats to the PHA that may work as subjects for analysis and also motivate the selection of material.

Thus, in accordance to the staked out analytical aims of this study, I aim to do something new and combine the respective advantages of IRT and BRT and apply them both in a new context to get a conceptual framework that allows me to study both how the PHA fends off reputational threats in their crisis communication regarding COVID-19, but also in *what situations* they do so and *in relation to what threats*. Precisely how I plan to go about this will be explained in the next chapter.

5. Methodology

5.1. Introduction

In this study, I wish to identify situations where the Swedish PHA is simultaneously communicating as a crisis manager and protecting its organizational image from reputational threats. Therefore, I intend using IRT to find indicators of this kind of "*double focus*", and BRT to localize situations where it can be detected. I will do so using *rhetorical analysis* according to the logic of *apologetic discourse.* The following chapter will present and motivate this methodological choice of path, including its strengths and weaknesses; beginning with a brief presentation of the overarching research design.

5.2. Research design

The purpose of this study is to map out and discuss how the PHA reacts to reputational threats in its crisis communication with help of the frameworks of IRT and BRT. It does not aim to identify potential causes or effects of said reactions. That said, this study is *descriptive* in that it aims to find out *if* and *how* a phenomenon occurs in a certain context rather than *why* it occurs or how it *should* do so (Esaiasson et al. 2017,38). Moreover, it can be said to be *theory-consuming* as it attempts to study, and increase the understanding of, a specific case of something with help of existing theoretical frameworks and concepts rather than testing said frameworks via hypotheses, or develop new ones (ibid.,42). Finally, this study's conclusions will be based on, and restricted to, a small set of strategically selected units of analysis. It can therefore be classified as a so-called *qualitative* study in that it aims to describe something specific and situational, rather than to generalize its conclusions to a larger population via statistical inference (Ekström & Johansson 2019,18).

5.3 Rhetorical analysis

The *rhetorical analysis* studies the communicative means used to persuade an audience in concrete situations (Mral 2013b,106). Rhetorical analysis, also called *rhetorical criticism,* can serve to scrutinize explicit arguments, but also to map the understated levels of a message that can be thought to exist within all kinds of communication; monological, dialogical, or visual (ibid.;2013a,6). According to Vigsø (2019,303), a rhetorical analysis is critical in that it aims to answer questions of *why* a message is composed the way it is and how the sender wishes to affect the receiver.

5.3.1 Why rhetorical analysis?

Rhetoric is, and has since thousands of years back been, a recognized and well-tried discipline and analytical tool used to study the composition and effect of communication (Mral 2013a,7). Rhetoric plays a significant role within crisis communication-studies, because crisis management-skills largely depend on the ability to communicate in a purposeful and trustworthy manner (Mral 2013a,8; Vigsø 2019,277; Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420). Today, rhetoric is first and foremost used to critically study persuasion and describe the interaction between all measures a sender can use for this particular purpose (Vigsø 2019,278).

There is a plethora of other analytical approaches suitable for in-depth and critical studies of communication and its intentions or underlying meanings, such as critical discourse analysis or framing analysis. However, I mean that there are several advantages with using rhetoric in this particular study. First, apart from a few exceptions in the shape of QCA's or surveys (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,99), most research to date on *Image Repair Theory* departs from rhetorical criticism (Benoit 2020,111). For a study that aims to work cumulatively, explore the applicability of IRT in a new context and in addition takes an interest in the implicit dimensions of communication, rhetorical criticism is thus arguably a logical choice of method. Another aspect that gives the rhetorical analysis a unique advantage and fit for this study is its shared focus with IRT but also with *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* on how a communicator acts to maintain or boost its reputation, or image. Or, to use the rhetorical term; its *ethos* (Vigsø 2013,21; McCroskey 2005,82). A final plus with rhetoric is that it offers an analytical framework for studying how actors respond to reputational threats and in turn a way to efficiently combine the frameworks of IRT and BRT. From a rhetorical perspective, how an actor reacts to expected or actual criticism is commonly studied using the two opposite concepts of accusation and rhetorical defense, or *kategoria* and *apologia* (Mral 2013a,11).

5.4 Central rhetorical concepts

In the rhetorical analysis, *concepts* are the tools that the analyst uses to grasp and describe relevant communicative mechanisms and actions (Mral 2013a,6;13). In the following section, I will therefore provide a further clarification of the terms *apologia, kategoria, ethos* and *rhetorical situation*; concepts that are necessary to both perform and follow the upcoming analysis. I will begin with the concepts of *apologia* and *kategoria.*

5.4.1 Apologetic discourse

As mentioned aloft, how an actor reacts to perceived or expected threats to image is from a rhetorical perspective usually studied via the opposites *kategoria* and *apologia,* or "*apologetic discourse*" (Ware & Linkugel 1973,273). The art of apologia also forms the basis for key theories in the field of crisis communication, IRT included (Olsson & Eriksson 2020,420). An apologia is an act of strategic verbal self-defense; an attempt to in a convincing way address an accusation; explicit or implicit (Mral 2013a,12). A kategoria is, in turn, what ultimately sets the conditions for the apologia to be performed. *Ergo,* apologia and kategoria constitute a speech set and must be studied as such; together (Vigsø 2016,45). The logic of kategoria and apologia will make out the structure for the forthcoming analysis where the IRT-framework will be used to help localize and describe the potential acts of defense, and BRT to localize and describe the accusations.

5.4.1 a) Apologia

There are multiple ways for an actor to rhetorically construct an apologia and the literature of crisis communication offers several frameworks that serve to categorize the different strategies to choose from. The typology of Image Repair Theory is one of the most well-known such frameworks, where its image repair-categories (potential strategies) can be used as a lens to analyze defensive efforts into their constituent parts (Benoit 2020,112). To repeat, the IRT-typology is derived from the assumption that "*attacks*" (or anticipated such) against an image that provoke defense have two components; *blame* and *offensiveness,* based on which Benoit distinguishes between five general strategies with in total eleven subcategories. These are presented step-wise below (ibid.,107)[10]:

[10] They are also presented in a table in **Appendix 1.**

The first general strategy is *denial*, consisting of two subcategories:

- S*imple denial*: denying having performed the undesirable event and/or bearing responsibility for it;

- *Shifting the blame:* placing responsibility on some other actor.

The second is *evading responsibility*, where the actor tries to contest responsibility for the undesirable event, consisting of four subcategories;

- *Provocation:* claiming to be a scapegoat and that others share the blame;

- *Defeasibility:* claiming that the event was due to a lack of information or ability and not entirely at fault;

- *Accident*: claiming it was a mishap;

- *Good intentions*: claiming to have meant well.

The third is *reducing offensiveness,* in which the actor tries to mitigate the negative effects of the event, which consists of six subcategories;

- *Bolstering*: attempting to strengthen the audience's positive perception by referring to actions performed in the past or to the own ethos;

- *Minimization*: downplaying the number of negative effects associated with the event;

- *Differentiation:* attempting to distinguish whatever happened from other, similar but more offensive examples performed by others;

- *Transcendence*: placing the event in a different – positive – context or frame of reference as an attempt to reduce the perceived offensiveness;

- *Attack the accuser:* questioning the credibility of the source of the kategoria;

- *Compensation*: attempting to reimburse the offended part.

The fourth is *corrective action:* responding by trying to correct the alleged problem.

The fifth is *mortification*: accepting responsibility and apologize (Benoit 2020,107).

In this study I will use Benoit's typology to accentuate and discuss what will be analyzed as the PHA's apologia in a selected number of situations. However, I will *not* use it as a framework *in itself* to search for pre-fixed categories of rhetorical defense in the material. To not lose sight of interesting nuances, similarities or differences, the logic and terminology upon which IRT is based will only be used as a benchmark to systematically reflect upon the observations made in the analysis after it is completed.

However, rhetorical defense – apologia – cannot be studied without also considering the kategoria that triggered them (Vigsø 2016,22). That brings us to the role of BRT in this study.

5.4.1 b) Kategoria

Image repair, or apologia, is thought to be provoked by one or several accusations, kategoria. Thus, by analyzing the kategoria embedded in a context, the researcher creates a framework for a sequential analysis of the apologia (Vigsø 2016,45). Bureaucratic Reputation Theory shares the assumption with IRT that a key goal of communication for an actor is to maintain a good reputation, and that threats to said reputation provokes a reaction. The difference, however, is that BRT is specifically intended to describe what drives the behavior of public organizations. In this study, kategoria will therefore be defined by what the BRT-literature calls a *reputational threat.*

A kategoria can, according to its rhetorical definition, concern *explicit* accusations by an external actor. It can also be *implicit* and refer to either understated messages in an otherwise verbal exclamation, or to *incidents* that by their very occurrence in one way or another imply that an actor does not live up to what society expects and demands (Vigsø & Von Stedingk Wigren 2013,34). Similarly, a *reputational threat* to a public organization, according to BRT's definition of it, refers to *allegations* and/or *incidents* that risk shedding a negative light on the organization in question. I will thus treat *kategoria* and *accusations* as synonymous to reputational threats in this study: *explicit kategoria* will refer to publicly noticed critique articulated by an external part. *Implicit kategoria* will refer to either understated accusations

embedded in explicit critique, *or* to incidents, whose occurrence are mediated and thus can be expected to be known among relevant stakeholders. This type of incident will be defined by what BRT-scholars Moschella and Pinto (2019) call *acts of reversal;* taking back earlier announcements or policy paths in a way that risks being perceived by stakeholders as a previous mistake and followingly a sign of incompetence (517).

Thus, two kinds of reputational threats will be of interest in the forthcoming analysis: *publicly noticed critique against the PHA*, or situations where it has in some way altered its approach; *acts of reversal*. These definitions will serve to guide the localization, description, and interpretation of situations likely to encapsulate reputational threats to the PHA. That is, to identify *kategoria* expected to provoke a rhetorical response by the PHA which in turn also can allow for an analysis of the corresponding *apologia.*

Important to note before moving on is that the concept of rhetorical defense presumes that social reality is constructed through communication and more than anything orients itself around *perceptions*. First, a defender must perceive a threat to image for defense to be actualized. Second, the utility of defense necessitates a possibility to change an audience's perceptions of a character or issue regardless of things' "*objective reality*" (Benoit 2020,112). Thus, when I in this study localize what I define as reputational threats to the PHA or analyze the PHA's reaction to them, the interest lies not primarily in what is objectively accurate or what critique is justified. I merely assume that the PHA perceives certain situations as problems that need to be addressed rhetorically.

5.4.2 Ethos

Rhetoric shares a focus with IRT and BRT on an actor's *ethos;* the attitude toward a source of communication held at a given time by a recipient (McCroskey 2005,82). Other ways to describe it are character, trustworthiness, reputation, or image (ibid.,84; Mral 2013a,10; Frandsen & Johansen 2017,96). In the forthcoming analysis, these terms will be used indiscriminately.

The classical definition of *ethos* divides it into three core elements;

1. *Knowledge* as in expertise judgement, useful skills and practical wisdom.

2. *A good character* with the right virtues for the task at hand; competence.

3. *Goodwill* as in moral and empathy (Mral 2013a,10).

The relationship between these elements is somewhat unclear, but overlapping and not necessarily interdependent (McCroskey 2005,86). Moreover, ethos is neither static nor situation-bound but varies between points in time and within one communicative act; a source is thought to bring with it an ethos constructed by previous acts or speeches to a current rhetorical situation (*initial ethos*) and have this altered (minus or plus) while and by communicating (*final ethos*) (McCroskey 2005,83; Mral 2013a,10-13; Vigsø 2019,283). Ethos in rhetoric can also refer to the appeal used to persuade an audience with help of the own persona ("*trust me, I am a professor*"), which together with *logos* (reason) and *pathos* (emotion) make the cornerstones of persuasive speech (Vigsø 2019,283).

In sum, ethos is based on the recipient's understanding of a source's knowledge, competence and moral. In the forthcoming analysis, reputational threats, or kategoria, will be described in terms of which of these three aspects of the PHA's ethos they threaten.
Finally, I will in this study adopt McCroskey's (2005,83) use of the term "*source*", which although used as grammatically singular may as well concern an organization and the individuals who speak on its behalf. Singular is used because although their individual ethos may in some cases affect the message, the primary ethos involved is still that of the organization.

5.4.3 Rhetorical situation

According to Vigsø, rhetoric is *situational* in the sense that each attempt of a speaker to persuade encapsulates a specific sender and audience, is tied to a specific context and is performed in a specific way that treats a specific problem (2019,279; 2016,41). Against this background, Vigsø means that each rhetorical analysis should start with an attempt to describe the rhetorical situation (2019,279)[11], and presents five questions for the researcher to answer to do so in a systematic manner:

1. *Who is trying to convince?*

   This concerns the source and its relevant characteristics such as self-interests, competence, whether it is an individual, organization or a combination, and its character (ethos).

2. *Who is one trying to convince?*

   Here, the audience(s) affected by the rhetorical efforts should be defined.

3. *What is one trying to convince about?*

   The "*what*" is the purpose of the communication; the problem a rhetorical situation is actualized by and orients itself around. Rhetorical analyses assume that communication can serve *dual* purposes; to persuade the recipient about an issue *and* about the sender's positive characteristics or image as competent, knowledgeable or empathetic, or the like.

4. *In what context?*

   Communication is enacted, received in and to a varying extent dependent on a certain cultural, spatial and timely context, which must be taken into account.

5. *How is one trying to convince?*

   This question is what the following analysis should answer, but relevant to mention can be bearing aspects of the communication such as medium and the strategies that will be analyzed (Vigsø 2019,280).

[11] Vigsø states that there is no consensus on how to define "*rhetorical situation",* but this is one way to do so (2019,279).

5.5 Close-reading

In practical terms, rhetorical analysis means the analysis of text[12], which in this case will be the PHA's press conferences. For this endeavor, this study has partly used Esaiasson et al.'s (2017, 228-229) suggestions regarding how to make notes and code to get a structure when working with large amounts of text, but mainly Bengtsson et al.'s (2020) guidelines specialized for rhetorical analysis.

Besides the share of the rhetorical analysis that takes place in the deconstruction of speech-sets being presented to the reader in the form of argumentative reasoning supported by citations (Bengtsson et al. 2020,35), the analytical process also entails what is called *close-reading of texts,* which aims at getting a first comprehension of the material being studied (ibid.,29). According to Bengtsson et al. (2020,30), there is no established way to conduct one, as it is always dependent on the specific text and situation. However, the goal is to hermeneutically uncover those substantive traces, patterns and structures that gives the text its dynamic but are not necessarily registered the first time one takes part of it. The central aspect of this is to be observant regarding linguistic detail and the connection between form, content, and context (ibid.,34). Another way to put it is to pay "*attention to the distinct parts*" of a text, and deconstruct its claims in relation to each other. Bengtsson et al. resembles the process with playing up the construction of an IKEA-furniture in reverse; to separate the pieces from each other, making it possible to distinguish, sort and thus get an overview of the parts that make the entirety (ibid.,37).

In more concrete terms, close-reading concerns a process of studying a text again and again until no new observations are added to the list, and the researcher is familiar with its dynamic enough to describe it in a way that is clear and interesting for the reader and argue for the interpretations she has made (ibid., 35). This is also why the close-reading and the presentation-part of the analysis are preferably separated. Instead of an "*objective*" reporting of observations, they are rather demonstrated in an "*essayistic*" fashion where the patterns and structures found during the close-reading also serve to structure the text (ibid.).

[12] Meaning, if applying a *semiotic* perspective, everything that may serve as resources when people communicate – the written word, the spoken word, visuals, actions or artifacts (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,149).

5.6 Analytical process

Here, a brief description of *my* analytical process is in order. After an initial mapping-out of the media reporting of the Swedish COVID-19 crisis, critical points in time were identified and served to localize potentially interesting press conferences, which were given a primary viewing to be selected or sorted out based on the analytical relevance of its content. This will be described more thoroughly in the upcoming material-chapter. After the screening-process, all chosen press conferences were analyzed in-depth according to the logic of close-reading, with every speech-act that could potentially classify as a reaction related to the threat at hand (i.e., reactions localized either in the PHA-representatives' presentations or in questions-and-answers from journalists) eventually verbatim transcribed and coded to create a structure. After a set of general, reoccurring codes-turned-themes were identified, a final selection of speech-pieces from all six press conferences were chosen for presentation and deconstruction according to the logic of kategoria and apologia, one press conference and situation at the time. As a final step, the observations were summarized in terms of the broader behavioral patterns observed along the way with the help of the terminology of IRT and BRT. The two latter parts of the process are what will be presented in the analysis, - and results-chapters.

5.7 Potential weaknesses

One limitation with using *apologetic discourse* to study communication is that it is mainly descriptive, meaning that the responsibility for assessing the efficiency or implications of a speaker's actions to a large extent falls on the researcher's own subjective interpretation (Vigsø 2016,54). However, for purposes of observing potential apologetic tendencies or patterns in a speaker's communicative output, the apologetic discourse remains a stable foundation (ibid.). I therefore deem this weakness to be of limited significance for my study since it, as mentioned, is merely descriptive and takes no interest in the effects of the PHA's communication.

Moving on, common critique against *case-studies* in general includes that one cannot generalize findings on the basis of an individual case, or that case-studies only work to formulate hypotheses and thus solely as the first step in a total research process (Frandsen & Johansen 2017,108). Others disagree with this critique, claiming that it oversimplifies the functions of case-studies and that only case-studies can allow us to become true experts at something (Flyvbjerg in Frandsen & Johansen 2017,108). Moreover, since my study also aims

at exploring the applicability of two theoretical frameworks in a new context, it can arguably be defined as precisely the first step in a potentially longer research process.

Another aspect that is important to reflect upon when applying a *qualitative and interpretive approach* is that the researchers own pre-understanding may affect the result as these two are practically impossible to distinguish (Esaiasson et al. 2017, 228; Ekström & Johansson 2019,14). Nevertheless, pre-understanding is not seen as unique for interpretative studies, but as a standing aspect in all research, since observations at the end of the day build on the interpreting act of a subject (ibid.). Potentially negative effects can also be prevented by the researcher via problem insight, transparent argumentations and constant reflection over the own interpretative work (Ekström & Johansson 2019,15). In order to strive for intersubjectivity, these aspects have therefore contributed to the structure and execution of the forthcoming analysis.

Finally, it should be mentioned that the material analyzed, the PHA's press conferences, are mainly performed in Swedish. I therefore need to make a disclaimer regarding potential, linguistic dissonances between my translations, the citations in their original execution, and the conclusions I draw from them. However, although it may affect the reader's experience, the fact that English is not my first language should have no impact on the analysis *per se* since the analytical steps described above have been conducted on the material in its original form. The translations of the transcribed speech-acts are put together only for presentation when they work as illustrative examples in the analysis.

5.8 Summary

This chapter has described my study's methodological approach; a rhetorical analysis where the logic of apologetic discourse will function as its analytical framework.
The above defined concepts: *kategoria, apologia, ethos,* and *rhetorical situation,* will serve to guide the identification, analysis and interpretation of reputational threats that can be expected to provoke a rhetorical response by the PHA in its communication. While the framework of IRT will serve to offer a benchmark and terminology to discuss potential reactions, the framework of BRT will serve to localize such reactions. The next chapter will present the material; the selected press conferences, which will both provide the study with its empirical data and set the contextual framework for the accusations and strategic defense-acts analyzed.

6. Material

Apart from interaction on social media, official crisis communication does not reach citizens directly but must usually be channeled via the mass media (Boin et al. 2017,77). However, the PHA has placed its emphasis on direct communication with the public throughout the COVID-19 pandemic via regular, live-streamed press conferences online. This rather unusual tactic has not only warranted the PHA comprehensive attention and long-running presence in the public eye (Dahl 2021b); it has also generated an abundance of unique material to analyze, providing a rare opportunity to study the direct communicative output of public leader-figures in connection to a crisis. This study aims to seize that opportunity. Below, said material – including its strengths and weaknesses – will be elaborated upon in more detail. The selection of units of analysis will also be presented and motivated.

6.1 Press conferences as the PHA's contact surface to the public

With "*the PHA's press conferences*" is meant the mutual press conferences held by the PHA together with the Civil Contingencies Agency and the National Board of Health and Welfare, but where the PHA is arguably in center (Dahl 2021b; Dahlgren 2021,50). The press conferences were initiated by the Civil Contingencies Agency via governmental mandate to coordinate outgoing information (MSB 2021) in March 2020 and have at the time of writing accumulated to over a 150 in number. All press conferences are aired live from the PHA's website but also on national radio, television and newspapers' online platforms (Dahlgren 2021,45). They have been called "*one of the largest information campaigns in modern history*" and make one of the cornerstones of Sweden's COVID-19 management (Dahl 2021b). During the spring (March to May) 2020, each press conference reached about one million (out of ten million citizens) viewers through various channels (MSB 2020). Whereas other countries also provide their citizens with continuous updates through press conferences or speeches, Sweden stands out in that the information mainly comes from representatives of expert agencies rather than politicians. They also stand out from the traditional press conference-format in that they are live-streamed and thus directed toward both the press and the public (Dahl 2021b.).

The press conferences follow a coherent structure; for the first three months they were held daily, and since mid-June 2020 every Tuesday and Thursday. Always at 2pm. Representatives from the PHA, Civil Contingencies Agency and National Board of Health and Welfare always

participate (other governmental bodies or representatives attend sporadically but these three are central) (Dahl 2021b). At times, extra press conferences outside the ordinary schedule are aired with the Government as main sender, usually with various agency representatives present as well. Those press conferences are aired from the Government's website and YouTube-channel instead. The press conferences last between 30-70 minutes and start with a situational report from each agency present, after which the floor is opened up for questions from journalists. The representatives as a rule participate in individual interviews afterwards. In accordance with the constitutionally protected Swedish Principle of Open Government[13], all videos are available to take part of afterwards, and are possible to access from the PHA's or Government's YouTube-channels[14].

What makes the press conferences even more interesting to study is that they have indirectly become an arena where the PHA has complete interpretive prerogative and can frame its own communication and thus itself choose central issues, central frames of interpretation, or possible courses of action. While the PHA describes the press conferences as a means to enable openness and availability toward the media (Dagens Media in Einhorn 2021), critics describe them as part of a conscious strategy of the PHA to avoid situations where it may face critique and debate. Virologist Lena Einhorn has, for example, portrayed the PHA as highly unwilling throughout the pandemic to face any sort of questioning; pointing out that the last TV-debate where any of the PHA's representatives participated was April 14th 2020, even calling it a "*threat against democracy*" (2021).
To that, however, must be added that the PHA, especially Tegnell, has been described by others as very available for journalists and their questions also in other contexts (Dahlgren 2021,59; Johansson in Dahl 2021b).

[13] Offentlighetsprincipen (SFS 1949:105, Chap. 2 (TF)).

[14] The PHA's YouTube-playlist (PHA 2021c):
https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLLqBo3UjMccAyAkJ9uiJkQpPjDYUoWlHp
The Government's YouTube-channel (Regeringskansliet 2021):
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCTCf9DNzLC78u2o_4Iu2frw

6.2 Press conferences as a genre of strategic crisis communication

Frandsen and Johansen (2017) define press conferences as a face-to-face event where actors representing an organization meet journalists representing the press (153). The press conference is also, according to them, a "*genre*"; a recognizable communicative event, characterized by a set of communicative purposes, identified and mutually understood by the members of the discourse community(s) in which it regularly occurs. A genre can also be defined as a group or family of *texts* that besides sharing the same communicative purpose also display common characteristics regarding message strategies (ibid.).

Press conferences are, mean Frandsen & Johansen, seldom subjected to study in crisis communication, although it is one of the most important genres at the onset of a crisis, and also one of the most popular to employ, as it grants control over the agenda and a possibility to formulate statements in advance. Press conferences may also give the first impression of the credibility of the organization in question (ibid.), and in extension grants the sender space to shape the narrative as well as the public perception of itself. In a similar manner, Ekström (2015) defines press conferences as a central part of modern, governmental institutions' repertoire of activities to handle the media and to influence public opinion (3). Although sometimes enforced by media pressure of influenced by external expectations, the sender has the ultimate control over their format (ibid.).

In sum, press conferences can be seen as a strategic crisis communicative tool for disseminating information, influencing stakeholder opinions, and shaping interpretations of events. The empirical material of a study should always be related to the problematique, and serve as the optimal means to answer the research questions posed (Ekegren & Hinnfors 2012,68). For a study aiming to observe potential, reputation-oriented "*double focus*" in the crisis communicative efforts of a public agency, press conferences from this point of view appears to be a highly appropriate choice of material, especially considering the criticism and controversies that has circulated around the PHA throughout the pandemic.

6.3 Strengths and weaknesses with using the press conferences

The format of the PHA's press conferences offers a number of advantages for the purposes of this analysis. First, they are addressed to multiple audiences (the media and the heterogeneous group known as "*the public*"), and their format is less constrained and more dynamic than other, pre-formatted official documents. Second, they are arguably strategically delivered in that the PHA's representatives generally choose what to bring up and how. Third, the press conferences allow for questions from journalists, why the statements delivered by the PHA representatives offer a unique opportunity to observe potential reputation management *in action.* Fourth, although this study neither has the capacity or ambition to speculate in any effects on public opinion, the press conferences have been such a central source of information for both the media and for citizens throughout this pandemic that it is only reasonable to assume that a large part of the public's comprehension of the PHA and its strategy are shaped through these communicative efforts.

Nevertheless, it is also important to as a researcher point out and problematize potential sources of error with the material chosen. One such source of error lies in the apparent risk that journalists save their most critical questions until after the press conference for their individual interviews. Dahlgren (2021) has via QCA studied *exchanges of meaning* (n=1215) to analyze the extent to which journalists posed critical questions (leading or direct, aiming for conflict or accountability) to the PHA during the press conferences compared to during the following individual interviews throughout 2020. Results show that critical questions *were* asked during the actual press meetings, but to a somewhat greater extent during the personal interviews (58). On average, about 33% of all journalists' questions were deemed critical throughout the year and this number has remained relatively stable (ibid.).

Moreover, the statements of the PHA made throughout this period in connection to the press conferences of course do not exhaust the list of its communicative outputs since its representatives have figured in other medial contexts as well (ibid.,59). However, as the intention of this study is to investigate how the PHA positions itself rhetorically against reputational threats, it is the occurrence rather than the relative share of critical questions that is of interest. That "*the best*" questions are saved for later or asked in another forum is potentially problematic, but analyzing personal interviews instead of press conferences would mean losing an opportunity to study a rather unique situation where the crisis communicator

is in control over the agenda. Analyzing both kinds could have been an interesting approach for a study of different spatial and timely limitations than the one conducted here. In sum, I still deem the advantages of analyzing the press meetings to outweigh the disadvantages.

6.4 Selection of material

Since the agency press conferences have by now accumulated to over 150 in number, and an intensive, rhetorical analysis of the entirety of the material is practically impossible considering the scope of this paper, a strategic selection has been made. As explained in the preceding methodology-chapter, the selection has been limited to critical points in time, or *situations*, where the PHA's reputation is arguably brought to its head. These situations have been localized with the help of *two distinct criteria* derived from the above made definitions of implicit or explicit accusations, *kategoria*.:

1) *Criticism:* Situations where the PHA has been publicly questioned or criticized.

2) *Acts of reversal:* Situations where something seemingly changes in the PHA's approach.

This way, the selection also works as a means to frame the forthcoming analysis and its reasoning. It has been limited to concern only the first year of COVID-19 (2020) (as the work with this study was initiated in January 2021) and to situations that have been notified in the media (thus assumed to be known by all actors involved) as well as during the corresponding press conferences**.**

6.4.1 Motivations for selected situations

To put the reader into context, the "*critical situations*" and their corresponding press conferences will be presented below one at a time, with a short background story. Three instances of criticism and two instances of reversal will be presented below.

6.4.1. a) Critique

The first selection criterium aims at capturing situations that allow for an investigation of how the PHA reacts and positions itself against the threats inherent in criticism directed toward it or its actions. Here, three cases of critique directed at the PHA which have attracted a relatively large amount of public and media attention have been chosen. The critique is assumed to possibly contain both explicit and implicitly forwarded accusations.

The 22 Scientists

One of the first cases of publicly noticed critique raised against the PHA comes from 22 prominent Swedish scientists who on April 14th 2020 publish a by now well-known debate article in one of the leading Swedish newspapers; *Dagens Nyheter* (meaning that it is available the night before to all subscribers) (2020). Referring to the PHA as talentless civil servants that have failed in controlling or foreseeing the development of the pandemic, the authors demand political interference. The relatively high fatality-rates and the introduction of the virus at many of the country's retirement homes are pointed out as particularly upsetting circumstances. Comparing Sweden's restrictions to neighboring Finland's and Norway's (whose situations are comparatively stable), the authors also suggest lockdowns of schools, cafés, mass-testing of healthcare staff and stricter quarantine-rules. Aiming to study how the PHA reacts to this critique, the press conference held this very day, April 14th, makes the first subject of analysis (PC1).

The Corona Commission

June 30th 2020, the Government recruits the so-called Corona Commission, which is assigned the task to evaluate the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. More specifically, the Commission is supposed to scrutinize the Government's, agencies', regions' and municipalities' measures to mitigate the spread of SARS-CoV-2 and its negative effects (Cederblad 2021). The Commission's first partial report, which is presented on December 15th 2020, directs stinging critique toward the PHA (among other actors), confirming that the measures set in to protect senior citizens against COVID-19 had failed. They were insufficient and came too late (Bjarnefors & Canoilas 2020). Moreover, the single most important factor behind the spread

at retirement homes is deemed to be the widespread societal transmission of the virus; something for which the PHA is deemed utterly responsible (SOU 2020:80,242).

As for the selection of press conferences, the analysis here encapsulates two separate ones. The first is held December 15th (PC4). The Corona Commission's report is published online together with a press release at 1pm that day, one hour before the PHA's regular press conference at 2pm (Coronakommissionens pressrum 2020). Moreover, the report is not to be handed over to the Government and presented at a press conference[15] until 3pm (Golis et al. 2020). This means that the PHA has at this moment had little or no time to read the report or discuss its statements internally. Several of the journalists present have read it and pose questions, however – why it still makes an interesting subject of study. Nevertheless, I also deem it necessary to complement the analysis with the next press conference in line to search for further comments. That is, December 17th (PC5), when the PHA has assumedly had time to read and reflect upon the critique more.

The King

In the annual TV-review of the year with the Swedish Royal Family, aired December 16th 2020, the Swedish King Carl XVI Gustaf states that he considers the Swedish COVID-19 strategy a failure due to the high death-rates, to all Swedes who have "*suffered immensly*" and to "*family members who have not been able to say goodbye to their loved ones*" (my translation) (Bull & Bäckman 2020). The statement awakens strong national and international interest (TT 2020b). For example, it makes top news on the British BBC (2020a). The PHA holds one of its regular press conferences the following day, December 17th (PC5). In other words, PC5 will be used in the analysis both in relation the critique from the King and from the Corona Commission, but with different focus in each respective situation.

6.4.1. b) Acts of reversal

This selection criterium aims at situations where the embedded reputational threat is more abstract. As mentioned earlier, implicit kategoria, or threats, are in this study referring to either implicit accusations forwarded in explicit critique, or to events that in one way or another challenge the PHA's reputation. This type of event has been defined as so-called *acts of reversal;* reversing earlier announcements or policy paths. The danger embedded in such actions lies in that they risk being perceived by the public or other stakeholders as that former

[15] (Regeringskansliet 2020).

comments or decisions were mistaken. These acts are thus assumed to function as implicit accusations that by their very (reported) occurrence raise question marks around the agency's competence and credibility. Below, two situations that I argue can be labelled acts of reversal will be presented; one reversal of an earlier announcement, and one reversal of an earlier policy path.

The second wave

The first situation can be defined as a reversal of an earlier announcement. During the summer months of 2020, the reported cases of COVID-19 steadily drop in number worldwide (Cederblad 2021). July 21st, the PHA presents three scenarios forecasting the continued spread of the disease, meant to work as an outline for the planning of healthcare and future recommendations until September 2021 (PHA 2020b). In connection to this, the PHA declares that it does not deem it likely that Sweden will witness a second wave in its classical sense; a returning, large societal spread of the virus, with possibly even higher infection-rates (TV4 2020a; TT 2020a). The Swedish strategy is planned accordingly; several national restrictions are lifted, and a future possibility for introducing local recommendations if necessary is opened up (Sköld et al. 2020). Come fall, the infection-rates successively start increasing again, with one region after another introducing local recommendations (ibid.; Dahl 2021a; Salihu et al. 2020), but the PHA holds on to, and repeatedly claims, that a second wave is deemed unlikely (see, for example, Tegnell on October 5th (Ritzén 2020) or October 29th (TV4 2020b)). In November, it grows all the more apparent that the new increase in infections is not isolated to local outbursts, but appears all over Sweden (Dahl 2021a). Eventually, the PHA is forced to adjust its former claim; on November 12th, the media reports that the PHA Tegnell now confirms that Sweden finds itself in what can be called a second wave (TV4 2020b). I suggest that there is reason to believe the press conferences on November 10th (PC2) and November 12th (PC3) best can capture this shift in tone, with the instances of local recommendations going from 12, to 15 (November 10th), then 17 (November 12th) of the country's 21 regions, and the PHA also receiving several questions from journalists about whether the epidemiological situation in Sweden can be classified as a second wave. These two have therefore been selected for analysis.

The face masks

The final situation will be analyzed as a reversal of an earlier policy path.

The issue of face masks is one of the most debated in Sweden in connection to COVID-19. In its initial phases, the PHA takes a sceptic stance toward the usage of face masks in public. Face masks, it is called, do not belong in the Swedish strategy (Falkirk 2020; BBC HARDtalk 2020). They are described as unnecessary and even potentially counter-productive if they are used the wrong way or draw attention away from other important behaviors such as keeping distance and a good hand hygiene, or staying at home when ill (Carlsson 2020; Mellin 2020; Svahn 2020). Another reason not to recommend face masks forwarded by the PHA is the allegedly weak or unclear scientific evidence for their efficiency against societal spread (Gad 2021). The PHA sustains from recommending face masks throughout spring, summer and fall of 2020, despite an increasing number of other countries and organizations, such as the Swedish Royal Academy of Science (KVA) and the WHO, doing so (ibid.; KVA 2020; Falkirk 2020; Löfvenberg 2020). On December 18th, however, the agency announces it will publish guidelines for wearing face masks during rush-hour in public transport (PHA 2020c). At this point in time, Sweden is one of the last countries, the 170th country to be exact, to recommend face masks outside of healthcare settings (BBC 2020b; Rogvall 2020).
In the news media, this is described as a volte-face or at least a welcomed (but late and protracted) change (see, for example, BBC 2020b; Mellin 2020; Rogvall 2020; Zeidler; Expressen TV 2020). Interestingly enough, however, the PHA itself has afterward stressed that the new face mask-recommendations should *not* to be seen as a change, meaning that it has claimed face masks to be efficient in certain situations all along (Nordlund 2020).

The new recommendation is announced during a press conference held together with the Government on December 18th, which has thus been selected as the final subject of analysis (PC6).

6.4.2 Summary - selected press conferences

To provide the reader with a clear overview of the material before moving on to the analysis-chapter, the press conferences selected to serve as units of analysis are presented in chronological order in **table 1** below[16]. All dates concern the year of 2020:

6.4.2 a) Table 1 – Selected press conferences:

Press conference (PCX)	Date	PHA-representative present	Critical Situation
PC1	Apr 14th	State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell	The 22 Scientists
PC2	Nov 10th	Head of Unit Sara Byfors	The second wave
PC3	Nov 12th	State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell	The second wave
PC4	Dec 15th	Head of Unit Sara Byfors	The Corona Commission
PC5	Dec 17th	State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell	The Corona Commission, The King,
PC6	Dec 18th	Director General Johan Carlson	Face masks

Note: this table showcases the selected press conferences together with their corresponding critical situation, date, PHA-representative present and assigned label. Full references for all press conferences including links to find them online are provided in a specific list in **Appendix 2.**

[16] To give a better timely comprehension of the issues that work as a foundation for the selected press conferences presented in this chapter, these are for the interested reader summarized chronologically with key-dates and events as a timeline in **Appendix 3.**

7. Analysis

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter and the next I will demonstrate this study's analytical procedure in terms of how the empirical material has been approached, scrutinized and, finally, categorized in terms of patterns that emerged in the process. The overall aim is to identify and describe behaviors employed in situations where the subject of analysis – the PHA – faces (and rhetorically addresses) reputational threats that emerge under ongoing crisis management, where the crisis in itself is external and concerns a societal issue (COVID-19). Put differently, the goal is to map indicators of "*double focus*" in the PHA's crisis communication; where it can be thought to fulfil its mission as crisis manager *and* protect its organizational image.

This chapter will be structured as follows; first, I will describe the overarching *rhetorical situation*. This is then divided into five distinct sub-situations (the selected critical situations), which each can be assumed encapsulates one or several accusations, *kategoria,* against the PHA's character that require rhetorical response, *apologia*.

7.2 Rhetorical situation

As mentioned aloft, each rhetorical analysis should depart from an attempt to describe the rhetorical situation. It will here be done by answering Vigsø's (2019) questions. Since the material to be analyzed stems from the same source and context, it is arguably more meaningful to let the following description concern the *overall* rhetorical situation of the PHA's press conferences and further specify case-to-case variations along the way in the remaining part of the analysis. As will be noticeable, this section also serves as somewhat of a summarizing recap of what has already been outlined in the study's preceding chapters.

7.2.1 Who is trying to convince?

The who (the source) can in this situation be divided into two separates: the PHA as an organization and implicit sender and its representatives as the incarnated and explicit senders acting on behalf of the organization. These will however be regarded as more or less synonymous in this analysis, meaning the representatives' acts will be analyzed as the PHA's, and that any personal interests or characteristics tied to the representatives as private persons will not be taken into consideration (unless for some reason deemed inevitable). As for relevant characteristics and interests, I will depart from the notion that the PHA acts in this

situation with an identity (what it wants to be "*known for"*) as an "*expert agency"* with a mission to provide others with accurate information and knowledge based on scientific rigor and now also to lay out and communicate about the Swedish COVID-19 strategy. Therefore, it is for the forthcoming analysis necessary to keep three aspects in mind. First, the PHA can be assumed to have a short-term interest in appealing to its audiences (mainly citizens and the press in this case) with its information and safeguard them from negative consequences of the disease. Second, the PHA can be assumed to have a more indirect interest in maintaining public trust to not lose the efficiency of its crisis communication. Third, considering its current salience in the public sphere, the PHA can be expected to *also* have a long-term interest in maintaining its image and trustworthiness as an expert agency that gathers plenty of its identity and ethos from competence and knowledge.

7.2.2 Who is one trying to convince?

Although the spectator-groups in this case are multiple, including other public organizations, corporations and the like, the COVID-19 press conferences are in their format and function mainly intended for the press and the public. Therefore, when studying the PHA's potential attempts to defend itself against implicit or explicit accusations below, it will be assumed to do so with these two groups as its intended targets. Moreover, the journalists might be the ones that ask questions and report what is said afterwards but due to the press conference's structure and public reach they also function as a direct channel between the citizenry and the PHA. Thus, even when a PHA-representative answers a question posed by a journalist, they can be assumed to indirectly be addressing and speaking to the general public at the same time. Moreover, it should be mentioned that another recipient that the PHA must reasonably consider in all aspects of its communication is its principal; the Government, with its own interests and expectations. However, due to spatial limitations, this dimension will only be given secondary attention. The focus will solely lie on studying the press conferences as a contact surface between the PHA, the public and the press, although aware of that other aspects most likely influence the PHA's communicative output as well.

7.2.3 What is one trying to convince about?

The "what", or overall *rhetorical problem* in need of a rhetorical solution, is in this case the occurrence of one or several *kategoria*; reputational threats that the PHA is expected to feel a need to address communicatively, either explicit or implicit. These accusations and their potential damage will be specified for each sub-situation further down. Moreover, as

rhetorical analyses take into consideration that communication can serve *dual* purposes, I as an interpreter am open for that all studied speech-acts can serve to both convince the involved audience(s) about the issue being discussed, *and* defend the own trustworthiness simultaneously. This is especially important to keep in mind when analyzing accusations and corresponding reactions of a more implicit and abstract character where there is no outspoken criticism to acknowledge or deny.

7.2.4 In what context? (time and place)

The instances of communication analyzed here are live-streamed press conferences taking place in Sweden under a time-span of eight months during 2020; the first year of the COVID-19 crisis. In this situation lie at least two factors likely to have an impact on the rhetorical output and its effects that must be considered. First, each selected press conference is time-specific, but also part of a larger and still ongoing information campaign, which will remain in the public memory for a long time ahead. The effect of the performances analyzed will thus have implications for the public assessments of the PHA's performances to come. Second, it is necessary to keep in mind the specific Swedish cultural context with its special view on public agencies; not only have they a, per tradition, unique and constitutionally protected autonomy, Sweden also entered the COVID-19 pandemic with uniquely high levels of institutional trust (Esaiasson et al. 2020,2). This is a prerequisite for the PHA's possibilities to reach the general public with its communication to begin with; without which this analysis would lose its relevance. Finally, an aspect that spans over both time and place is that the communication takes place in a crisis-situation; a context which it was established earlier encapsulates high uncertainty and limited information for all involved parties. For the public, strong emotions can also be included.

7.2.5 How is one trying to convince?

This is the question that the remaining part of the rhetorical analysis is supposed to answer, but relevant to mention already now is the usage of press conferences as a medium, with its limitations and opportunities. As discussed earlier, the initiative to use press conferences comes not from the PHA solely but are initiated by the Civil Contingencies Agency via governmental mandate to coordinate outgoing information. Nevertheless, the PHA has been the one agency receiving most attention, and the platform and influence given to it via these press conferences are still unique in their kind. Not even in neighboring Scandinavian countries with otherwise similar state-apparatuses have agencies had as much say (Sandberg

2020)[17]. Thus, what makes the press conferences even more interesting to study is that they have indirectly become an arena where the PHA has control over the agenda and a possibility to formulate statements in advance. This circumstance highlights that the point of departure for the forthcoming part of this analysis must be that the PHA operates on a unique platform where it has the upper-hand and opportunity to, for each accusation, control how it is initially framed and defined in the public discourse. That said, it is time to study whether and how this opportunity has been utilized.

7. 3 Threats and reactions; the PHA's crisis communication via apologetic discourse

Departing from the rhetorical situation presented above, this part of the analysis will analyze each of the selected critical sub-situations and their corresponding press conferences. First, the situation and its inherent accusations will be described and reflected upon. The focus will lie on describing what in the accusations that make out a threat as in towards which part of the PHA's reputation, ethos, they are directed (competence, moral or knowledge) and whether the accusations are explicit or implicit (but can be assumed to be known by all actors involved). Each description will be followed with an analysis of the matching apologia; PHA's reaction and behavior in said situations. The focus here is on whether and how the PHA addresses the emerging accusations, either by bringing them up itself or by answering questions from journalists that do.

7.3.1 Threats and reactions – a reader's guide

This section is divided into two parts; 1) *critique* and 2) *acts of reversal*. It will contain several citations used to illustrate my claims, limited to the most straightforward examples due to spatial limitations. All citations that are originally in Swedish (which makes most of them) have been translated manually. To provide the reader with the most representative understanding of the transcribed speech-acts possible, expletive vocalizations, such as "*ehm*" or "*uhm*" are written out, and accentuated phrases are marked with boldface. Short pauses are denoted with one slash and longer silences with two. Complementary comments are presented within parentheses and non-italics. References, with *time* specified within brackets, are

[17] To that should be added however that Sweden is the only Scandinavian country with an explicit ban on ministerial rule which makes an important difference in the countries' respective administrative models and the roles they have assigned their agencies in the management of COVID-19 (Kerpner 2021; Sandberg 2020).

showcased underneath each citation to guide the reader who wants to find them in their original execution.

7.3.2 Part 1 – The Critique

This part of the analysis will investigate how the PHA reacts and positions itself against critique publicly directed toward it or its actions. The three cases of criticism and their inherent accusations will be analyzed one at a time.

7.3.2. a) The 22 Scientists

Kategoria

One the first cases of publicly noticed critique raised against the PHA comes from a relatively long list of prominent, Swedish scientists, who on April 14th 2020 publishes a by now well-known debate article in one of the leading Swedish newspapers Dagens Nyheter (2020). The article contains several explicit accusations; that the PHA's strategy to fight COVID-19 has failed, and that this is because the PHA lacks a working plan to fight the pandemic. These two first accusations clearly aim for the PHA's competence. Moreover, the PHA's alleged reluctance to accept a need to change approach is pointed out by the scientists as a reason behind the introduction of the virus at retirement homes and large number of lives lost. A (more or less explicit) accusation directed toward the PHA's moral can thus also be identified and defined as follows: the PHA cares more about prestige than the lives of the elderly. *Ergo*, the PHA lacks empathy.

I argue that the reach of this article along with the accusers' status as "*fellow experts*" in the field – and thereby assumedly high trustworthiness in their critique – is what makes it a noticeable threat to the public perception of the PHA's ability to handle the Swedish COVID-19 crisis, which is assumedly necessary for it to respond to. Especially since the PHA to a large extent bases its organizational identity on knowledge and scientific expertise, and this critique thus comes from within the very same sphere that provides the PHA a significant part of its ethos.

Apologia

On the press conference April 14th, the PHA is represented by State Epidemiologist Anders Tegnell, who does not address the critique on his own initiative but receives in total four questions about it. The two most direct and comprehensive examples in terms of exchanges of meaning will be presented below.

When the floor is opened up for journalists, Tegnell is immediately asked about the article. The first question concerns what he thinks of the 22 scientists' claims that Sweden has reached the same level of deaths as Italy (at this point in time one of the countries that are worst off in the pandemic), and that the PHA lacks a working strategy to turn this development around (TV4, PC1 [8:28-8:54]). Tegnell gives the following reply:

> "*First of all, I want to **absolutely deny** that we wouldn't have a working strategy. We certainly **do**. That's on them. Moreover, the fatality-rates they cite are **incorrect**. // ehm / They don't add up with the Swedish fatality rates you see in the numbers shown here […] / Moreover, we know that in **Italy,** only deaths in hospitals are registered. So, that article contains a **number** of incorrect statements, **unfortunately.** // Ehm / I have no further comments."*
>
> (Tegnell, PC1 [8:54-9:24])

The overall impression of this response is that Tegnell demonstratively distances the PHA from the claims forwarded by the 22 scientists by a) denying their accuracy b) rejecting the relevance of them altogether by stating that he has no further comments. Moreover, the critique can also be said to be simultaneously met with a counteraccusation. By pointing out certain statistics presented in the article as incorrect, he implicitly puts into question the accusers' trustworthiness and thus further minimizes the relevance of their claims. This observation is strengthened by Tegnell's usage of diminishing terms such as "*unfortunately*".

Similar tendencies are displayed again when the next journalist in line asks Tegnell to comment the scientists' claim that Sweden should have suggested stricter measures earlier than they did to create a "*breathing space for preparations*" which are now made parallelly with fighting the pandemic (Dagens Nyheter, PC1 [10:44-11:10]), and Tegnell replies:

> "*Well // I **still*** (resting on pronunciation) *don't understand what they mean there. We have not had any crisis at our hospitals. It has been tough but they have always adapted and there have always been **empty beds** at the intensive care units […] These retirement home-problems / is a problem that goes **way back** which I don't think we would have been able to solve in a few weeks' time. Then, we can look at other countries that have taken very strict measures such as **Belgium** / where the development is now **significantly** worse than in Sweden. So / there is much one can think about this, most of all I think one should be **careful** making any sort of assessment in how well different countries have succeeded at this stage […]"*
>
> (Tegnell, PC2 [11:10-12:00])

Noted should be that the journalist does not specify *which* preparations or measures are meant, providing Tegnell with a certain freedom for interpretation. It therefore becomes interesting to reflect upon what aspects he chooses to highlight in his response. First, he stresses a claimed absence of crisis at Swedish hospitals. The scientists do not specifically address that issue in their article but in this context, it indirectly puts into question their claimed need for a "*breathing space*" for preparations, and thus simultaneously depicts the situation in Sweden as being – and always having been – under control. Once again, the accusations that the PHA lacks competence or a working strategy are thus rejected by Tegnell, who denies there is a problem. Next, he brings up the situation of Swedish retirement homes, which is one the main critiques forwarded by the 22 scientists. In this matter, Tegnell indeed acknowledges the problem, but implicitly puts the blame for this unfortunate situation elsewhere, "*way back*", most likely referring to the long and complex history of problems with elderly care in Sweden[18] "*which I don't think we would have been able to solve in a few weeks' time"*. Finally, Tegnell chooses to compare Sweden to Belgium; a country that is worse off statistically but has had stricter measures, to nuance the critics' depiction of stricter measures as a given solution to a comprehensive spread of the virus and thus reject the

[18] To put the reader into context, it should be mentioned that Tegnell is not alone in his claim that Swedish elderly-care has been suffering from severe quality-deficits for decades; something that has become even more evident and debated during the COVID-19 pandemic. See, for example IVO (2019); Lindgren & Lindstedt (2020); Stockholm University (2020).

accuracy of the claim. By highlighting the complexity of this issue, Tegnell once again denies the accusations aimed at the PHA's competence by demonstrating his insight in the matter, providing a perspective from which Sweden's situation does not look as bad as depicted in the article (although this seems somewhat contradictory considering that he in the following sentence questions the appropriateness with making comparisons at "*this stage*").

Summary

The debate article published by the 22 scientists accuses the PHA's competence and moral by pointing at Sweden's high infection, - and fatality-rates and retirement home-situation. To sum up the overall impression of Tegnell's behavior throughout this press conference (including not only the examples forwarded here), the most distinguishing features in all responses regarding the 22 scientists is to reject the relevance of their claims entirely. This is especially true for the accusations regarding the PHA's alleged lack of plan and in extension its competence – which are denied and occasionally met with counteraccusations. The problems with retirement homes are acknowledged on several occasions, but the blame is placed elsewhere and the implicit moral accusations from the scientists connected to this issue are consequently also left unaddressed. Other prominent features in Tegnell's response are how he demonstratively distances himself from the critics (visible in his emphasis on certain words and by how he is unwilling and short in his replies, thereby signaling that their opinion is not that important), and how he disregards the scientists' comparisons of Sweden to other countries but does the same thing himself without disclaimers.

7.3.2 b) The Corona Commission

Kategoria

The Corona Commission's first partial report regarding the fatal introduction of COVID-19 in many of Sweden's retirement homes is presented on December 15th 2020, confirming that the measures set in to protect senior citizens against COVID-19 has failed; an output for which the PHA is pointed out as partially responsible. The report directs two explicit accusations against the PHA's competence. First, it failed at introducing sufficient measures to minimize the spread at retirement homes in time. Second, it was unsuccessful at keeping down the societal spread of the disease, which is deemed to be the single most important factor behind the retirement home-situation. Finally, an implicit moral accusation can be identified; the PHA has in its strategy failed to protect one of society's most vulnerable groups.

Unlike the 22 scientists, who act on their own initiative, the Corona Commission consists of experts who are governmentally assigned the particular mission to scrutinize the Swedish COVID-19 management. From that point of view, the critique forwarded by the Commission can be understood as being of particularly harmful character. Not only does the partial report receive much media attention (thereby risking to harm the public perception of the PHA short-term), their assessment will most likely have heavy impact on the PHA's principal; the Government. Not the least in the upcoming aftermath and accountability-phase of the pandemic. At the end of the day, the PHA's organizational survival, raison d'être, and its representatives' careers are at stake.

Apologia

As mentioned above, this partial analysis encapsulates observations from two separate press conferences which will be presented sequentially. The first is held on December 15th (PC4), and the second on December 17th (PC5).

Starting with December 15th, the representative present during this press conference, Head of Unit Sara Byfors, does not on her own initiative bring up the Corona Commission's freshly published report, neither do any of the other agencies present (who are also subjects of the Commission's criticism). It is mentioned by the journalists, however. The first question is directed to the National Board of Health and Welfare, whose representative Johanna Sandvall replies that the agency has not had time to read the report yet but welcomes the scrutiny (PC4 [13:30-14:20]). Thereafter, the focus is directed toward the PHA, with the same journalist asking Byfors to comment on the Commission's claims that the PHA was too late with closing retirement homes and unclear with the risk of asymptomatic transmission (Dagens Nyheter, PC4 [41:20-41:40]):

> *"Well, I can / really just copy Johanna's reply that this report came* ***today*** *so I haven't had time to take* ***part*** *of it /ehm / and those writings so we will have to get* ***back*** *with* ***specific*** *comments once we have read the entire* ***context*** *ehm / simple as that and also that we* ***too*** *welcome this* ***scrutiny****, of course, for future lessons."*
>
> (Byfors, PC4 [14:40-15:02])

This reply can arguably be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the problem in question as Byfors' statement that the PHA welcomes the Commission's scrutiny for future lessons builds on a premise that there are things to scrutinize and improve. The more specific accusations are left uncommented since Byfors claims she have not read the report; an argument made possible to use due to the timing of the its release (although these issues hardly can be any news to Byfors in themselves). However, the reaction also signals openness, as she asks to get back with comments. The end-result is that no blame is neither accepted nor denied.

Later, another journalist brings up the Commission's report again but with a slightly different take, asking how the PHA will protect the elderly at retirement homes this time around when Sweden finds itself in a second wave (Ekot, PC4 [30:46-31:00]). This question is interesting because it focuses the attention directly onto the PHA's competence, offering Byfors an opportunity to persuade the present audiences that the agency despite the Commission's critique is, at least this time around, capable of delivering what is expected of it in terms of protecting the elderly:

> *"Well // **several measures** have been taken, and there is more **information** and more knowledge about how the virus is spread that ehm // hopefully enables them / us to prohibit transmission to the same / extent on retirement homes now this fall ehm // compared to how it was this spring* (inhales). *So / then it is up to ehm / the **executive chiefs** and so on to implement these changes to make sure it does not happen / to embrace the lessons from this spring* (nods)*."*
>
> (Byfors, PC4 [31:00-31:34])

Again, Byfors acknowledges the problem. By explaining that measures (unspecified) have been taken and lessons learned to prohibit a similar outcome at retirement homes during the second wave as during the first, she indirectly admits a wrongdoing, or insufficient doing at least, on the PHA's behalf. She also guarantees it will not be repeated. However, she also stresses that at the end of the day, the utmost responsibility is someone else's; the *executive chiefs' and so on*, which shifts parts of the blame away from the own agency.

Moving on, then, to December 17th (PC5). Neither this time is the Commission's report brought up by the PHA – here represented by Tegnell – during the initial presentation.

Moreover, this press conference coincides with the critique from the King who seemingly steals journalistic attention from the Commission's report, about which Tegnell only receives one question:

> *"The other big news this week was the Corona Commission's initial report. There was a lot of focus on what it said about the elderly but it* ***also*** *stated that the main reason // for Sweden's development was* ***the general spread*** *of the virus. Do* ***you*** *not bear* ***responsibility*** *for the failure to stop that? And is there a* ***danger*** *that you're making the same mistakes in the second wave as in the first?"*
>
> (Financial Times, PC5 [33:35-34:02])

This question is close in nature to those answered by Byfors on December 15th, although the focus now lies on the *second*, and (during the press conferences at least) thus far unaddressed, accusation within the Commission's report; the one that concerns the general spread of the virus. Tegnell replies:

> *"I think in Sweden we do as in* ***all other countries*** */ we do our best to keep the spread as / low as possible. Ehm we can see countries using a lot of different measures. We cannot really see any clear correlation between measures and actual stop of the spread. There are a lot of countries who have strict lockdowns, still a lot of spread and the other way around so this is very* ***complicated****. And I would just / like to* ***restate*** *that we are* ***really doing our best*** *within the circumstances we are to limit the spread as much as possible. As we have* ***all through this pandemic****."*
>
> (Tegnell, PC5 [34:02-34:34])

Tegnell does not directly answer the question but compares Sweden's strategy and outcome to that of other countries; an approach observed earlier in this analysis. Moreover, he stresses *twice* that the agency always does its best given the circumstances. The accusation at hand is thus neither denied nor acknowledged. Instead, the focus is moved from the PHA's blame and competence (or lack thereof) onto the complexity of the pandemic at large and the PHA's good intentions.

Summary

In sum, neither Byfors' nor Tegnell's reactions entail any direct confirmation of the critique forwarded by the Commission. The accusations are not explicitly accepted. However, they are not questioned either. Rather, both representatives acknowledge its relevance in different ways. Byfors explicitly by stating that the PHA welcomes the scrutiny without having read it, but also seemingly admits to wrongdoing (at least implicitly) by promising that the PHA has learned since then. Tegnell is more implicit, displaying a clear interest in first and foremost emphasizing the agency's good intentions and putting Sweden's situation in perspective. Finally, although both representatives showcase an absence of emotionally charged language and explicit remorse, Tegnell's repeated insurance that the PHA is *really* doing its best can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the implicit moral accusation embedded in the Commission's critique.

7.3.2 c) The King

Kategoria

On December 16th 2020, the King's condemnation of the Swedish COVID-19 strategy goes public. At that moment, the King (intentionally or not) also articulates an indirect accusation against the PHA in its role as architect of said strategy. Similar to previous cases, the accusation is most apparently directed toward the PHA's competence; it has failed in its mission to manage the Swedish response against COVID-19. Moreover, the emotional framing of the King's criticism can be said to encapsulate another implicit attack directed at the PHA's goodwill or moral; its alleged failure has led to death and suffering, and robbed family members of the opportunity to "*say goodbye to their loved ones.*"

The Swedish King has no expertise in fighting pandemics (that I know of), neither does he possess any formal political power. However, the King and his actions have special, *symbolic* authority and he is an important ambassador for Sweden in various international contexts. The PHA does in legal terms not answer to the King differently than to any other Swedish citizen. However, it is very rare for the Swedish King to engage politically in an issue, why a comment such as this one generates massive media attention and that way arguably still becomes something the PHA will have to react to publicly. Noted should also be that the King's comment goes public within two days after the Corona Commission's report does so. The above aspects of the PHA's work are thus already a salient subject for discussion in the public discourse when the King makes his statement.

Apologia

The King's critique comes on December 16th and the PHA, represented by Tegnell, holds one of its regular press conferences the following day (PC5). Similar to the previous cases, the issue at hand is not brought up until the floor is opened up for journalists, where the questions about it are several. The first question goes as follows:

> "*How did **you*** (Tegnell) *react to the King's statement to SVT that we have **failed**?*"
>
> (Aftonbladet, PC5 [18:55-19:09])

Tegnell's reply is concise:

> "*Well / / I have **no*** (resting on pronunciation) *reason to review **that**. I am sure we will be / discussing for a long time ahead what we succeeded with and what we failed with so I have no further comments*".
>
> (Tegnell, PC5 [19:10-19:20])

As apparent, Tegnell neither denies nor confirms the King's critique. Rather, he demonstratively denies having a reason to comment on it at all (with a speaking emphasis on "*that")*. Tegnell does not explain why but understated should logically be that the PHA does not answer to the King in any official way (something that can be assumed to be known by the audience). The King's statements are not explicitly invalidated, but Tegnell points out that the rights and wrongs of the PHA's performance is an ongoing debate, the final assessment yet to be made, and that the King uttering his opinion does not bring it nearer to closure. Thus, instead of addressing the accusations embedded in the situation at hand, he reduces their relevance.

The given impression is further strengthened by Tegnell's reply when the same journalist continues, asking what he thinks about the fact that it is quite rare for the King to behave in a way that can be interpreted as political [19:20-19:27]:

> "***Not at all*** (sic!). *That question should be asked to either the politics or the King*."
>
> (Tegnell, PC5 [19:27-19:32])

With this reply, Tegnell draws a line between matters relevant to the PHA on the one side and matters irrelevant to the PHA on the other. Then, by placing both "*the politics"* and the King's statement in the latter half, he signals that this is the wrong forum for discussing His Majesty's potentially political exclamations. This demarcation serves to further reduce the relevance of the King's critique, but also as a reminder of the PHA's position as an agency consisting of civil servants that stand and operate outside the realm of politics.

Most of Tegnell's answers (all not cited here) to questions regarding the King follow the same pattern and the accusations remain to a large extent unaddressed. The exception being a question that is only indirectly related to the King as a sender, which necessitates Tegnell to give a more elaborate reply. This happens when Tegnell is asked whether he *agrees* with the King or not in that Sweden has failed with regards to its fatality-rates (Expressen, PC5 [20:45-21:03]):

> "*It is **of course** so that the number of deaths in Sweden are // **deeply regrettable** and we will **absolutely** need to work on understanding what we can improve in order to prevent it from **ever** happening again. Ehm / but whether one should call it a **failure** or not should be left for **future investigators** to decide*."
>
> (Tegnell, PC5 [21:03-21:23])

Two distinct reactions can be distinguished in this answer. Unlike earlier examples, the relevance of the *issue* is this time acknowledged by Tegnell; the high fatality-rates are indeed deeply regrettable and must be prevented from ever happening again. Tegnell also seemingly admits the PHA's responsibility for this unfortunate outcome and discusses it as a competence-related issue by portraying it as something "*we will absolutely need to work on"* (although exactly who Tegnell means by "*we*" in this context is left unspecified). Then, however, Tegnell turns to problematizing the King's choice to use the label "*failure*" by defining it as a term only experts are capable or mandated to assign. This way, the focus is again removed from the PHA and onto the questionable authority of the accuser.

Summary

When the Swedish King calls the Swedish COVID-19 strategy a failure he indirectly attacks the PHA's competence and moral. By Tegnell, this critique is neither denied not questioned; at one point he even gives the King technically right in that the high fatality-rates are somewhat of a result of a shortcoming on the PHA's behalf. However, the accusations are invalidated by Tegnell pointing them out as more or less irrelevant for the PHA to respond to, implicitly referring to the King's lack of authority in determining what is a failure in this matter and not, thus distancing the PHA from any statements made by the Swedish King. Added to the calculation should here also be the short replies and unwillingness to discuss the matter further ("*I have no reason to comment on **that**")*. The outcome is an apologia that is duplicitous; Tegnell to some extent admits responsibility for the undesirable outcome that the accusation entails, but at the same time reduces its significance.

7.3.3 Part 2 – Acts of reversal

This part of the analysis will investigate how the PHA manages reputational threats that can be said to occur in connection to so-called *acts of reversal* that are potentially damaging because they signal the occurrence of an unacceptable mistake or shortcoming on the PHA's behalf to its different stakeholders (here, the public and press). Two different situations classified as reversals will be analyzed below one at a time. Unlike the former part where the critique is already outspoken, the aim here is to map out how the PHA positions itself against the criticism these acts can be *expected* to trigger later on.

7.3.3 a) The second wave

Kategoria

During the fall of 2020, a re-surge of COVID-19 strikes with a force unexpected by the PHA, who time and again has claimed there will not be a second wave in Sweden. As mentioned aloft, I argue that this situation can be thought to encapsulate an *act of reversal* in that the facts on the ground eventually necessitate the PHA to withdraw its earlier statements. In this case, it risks raising questions of whether the PHA lives up to what society expects from it in its role as head-COVID-crisis manager, where the core of its mission is to stake out the way forward based on what can be read from the current situation. The reversal in this case signals that the Swedish COVID-19 strategy for the fall has been based on a misleading prognosis,

which thus generates an implicit kategoria directed partly at the PHA's competence, partly its knowledge; the PHA has been mistaken.

What makes this specific situation particularly threatening, apart from its media salience, is the earlier insurances from the PHA to the media that Sweden's relatively widespread societal transmission of the virus during the spring would turn into an *advantage* against the virus come fall, due to high immunity within the population (Milne 2020; Fensby 2020). Something that back then could be said to legitimize its chosen course of action. The strong increase in infections during the fall invalidates this claim. According to Vigsø (2013,21), an event that did not challenge an actor's ethos when it took place can do so in *retrospect* in connection to another event later on. Thus, in this situation the PHA risks ending up with not only an injured "*assigned*" ethos but also a revised and injured *initial* ethos. This is what Vigsø (2013,22) calls a "*retrospective decrease"* in ethos. From this perspective, this situation can even be said to pose a "*double*" threat to the PHA's reputation.

Apologia

The press conferences on November 10th (PC2) and November 12th (PC3) encapsulate the point in time when it grows all the more apparent that the new increase in infections is not isolated to local outbursts but appears all over Sweden. These are analyzed chronologically.

November 10th, the PHA is represented by Sara Byfors. During the introductory briefing of the epidemiological situation, Byfors confirms that conditions in Sweden are increasingly severe, with infection-rates rising in most parts of the country. She does not speak of the development in terms of a second wave, however. Neither does she mention that the numbers are following another direction than the PHA originally expected they would. It is not until the word is handed over to the journalists present that the matter brought up:

> "*I know you don't like speaking in terms of a* ***second wave*** *and so on but / I would* ***still*** *want you to comment on it because we are witnessing a rather broad spread of the disease now which deviates* ***noticeably*** *from the scenarios you presented this summer. // So can we / can we* ***speak*** *of a second wave now?"*
>
> (Reuters, PC2 [55:25-55:48])

Instead of answering with a simple yes or no, Byfors gives a rather extensive answer that is here cut short for the sake of readability. In the part not cited, Byfors replies that she is unsure whether one should be speaking of a second wave or not, but it can be established that there is a broad spread in large parts of the country that has struck in a way the PHA "*perhaps did not predict during the summer".* She continues:

> *"[…] But it is* ***also*** *true that we had one scenario, scenario* ***two*** *I think it was, which predicted an even spread that would increase during the fall and there we can see that / the assessment of the need for* ***hospitalizations or intensive care*** *is pretty close to where we are now, between scenario one and scenario two, but not the number of cases. It might have to do with the fact that we have estimated / that we are finding* ***more*** *cases than we thought we would, because we are* ***testing*** *more* (inhales). *Ehm // but /* ***calling it a second wave or not*** *is //* (smacks lips, wiggles head side-to-side) *of* ***academic significance*** *what that is. We have a spread that we need to cooperate to hamper*."
>
> (Byfors, PC2 [55:48-56:55])

Byfors' response can, prima facie, be interpreted as more or less of an admission that the PHA has indeed been mistaken, as she acknowledges the journalist in his claims that the current development is not in line with what the PHA predicted. However, this is not without *also* stressing several disclaimers; the PHA has actually not been *entirely* wrong. In the aspect where it seemingly *has* been – the number of cases – a potential explanation is suggested in the increased testing capacity. Byfors also makes sure to stress *twice* that although the fall's development might have taken a somewhat unexpected turn, she is not prepared to go as far as to label it a "*second wave*". As a motivation, she refers to its "*academic significance*", thereby translating it into something abstract that only experts can understand and should perhaps be discussed in another forum, thereby avoiding the actual question.

Two days later, November 12th (PC3), Tegnell receives a similar question as the one posed to Byfors (neither him bringing up the issue himself until asked about it):

> "*Well, ehm / I asked a question here a couple of weeks ago whether you thought we had entered a second wave. Would you say **now** that we have?"*
>
> (TV4, PC3 [19:20-19:31])

As it appears, this is not the first time Tegnell is asked questions about a second wave; something he has previously denied. This time, however, he replies (more or less) in the affirmative:

> "*Yeah, **whichever definition one now wants to assign Second Wave**. As I said I don't think that the **definition** in itself is that important of an issue but we **have** a spread that we can // a societal spread in most regions in Sweden today. […]"*
>
> (Tegnell, PC3 [19:31-20:01])

Unlike Byfors two days earlier, Tegnell now confirms that the current development *can* be resembled or defined as a second wave. However, he (just *like* Byfors) displays a certain unwillingness to use the term "*second wave*" himself, referring to its somewhat unclear meaning and the questionable relevance of specific definitions. Moreover, Tegnell takes on a somewhat different tone when the same journalist, having had her first question confirmed, continues and brings up earlier statements he has made:

> "*Because this summer and also this fall you said that the risk of a second wave was **not that great*** (overlap). / *That we had all tools in order and so on.*"
> (TV4, PC3 [20:01-20:14])

To this question, which directly touches upon the reputational threat here under scrutiny (the implicit accusation that the PHA has been mistaken), Tegnell answers:

> "*No, it //* (overlap) *yes, and we **do,** to keep this on a reasonable level but // the development has been another than we thought this summer and that is*

> *true* ***not only for Sweden but for practically the entire world*** *that this pandemic accelerated in a way I think* ***few*** *countries could predict [...]*"
>
> (Tegnell, PC3 [20:11-20:35])

This time, Tegnell confirms explicitly that the PHA seems to have misjudged the development of the pandemic for the fall, but *not* entirely. Instead, he asseverates that although Sweden might be facing an unexpected second wave, he is still certain in his judgement that it will be relatively mild or kept on "*a reasonable level*" thanks to the structures already in place (thus referring to past performances). As another extenuation, he also stresses that the PHA was far from *alone* in being wrong in this matter.

This aspect of Tegnell's reply is especially interesting when put in relation to a later question, asking him to comment on a claim made by Financial Times that Sweden's hospitalizations are currently growing faster than anywhere else in Europe (Journalist of inaudible origin, PC3 [33:07-33:19]). This question is not directly connected to the situation at hand, but its depiction of Sweden somewhat challenges Tegnell's claim that the development of COVID-19 is relatively mild or under control. It is commented by Tegnell in the following way:

> "*Well, it is probably true but must be put into its* ***context*** */ we are on a different part of the curve than the rest of Europe. The rest of Europe has had an* ***extremely*** *intense development which is now possibly starting to stabilize somewhat.* ***We*** *are a far bit behind. / We also started off at a much lower level than most other countries. It is probably true* ***in numbers*** *but it does* ***not*** *mean, as we heard from the National Board of Health and Welfare* (referring to an earlier part of the press conference in question), *that our healthcare system is anywhere* ***near*** *any significant strain"*
>
> (Tegnell, PC3 [33:19-33:50])

What Tegnell seems to be meaning here is that Sweden's display of a relatively high-paced increase in hospitalizations depends on the fact that the rest of Europe has already experienced their own similar acceleration, why a cross-country comparison easily becomes misleading. In this context, the numbers thus fail to show the true reality of the Swedish situation, which is not as bad as it seems. The forwarded claim is thus rejected and Tegnell's own assessment reaffirmed. Interestingly enough, that Sweden would find itself in another,

later phase of the epidemiological development than other parts of Europe was not mentioned by Tegnell when explaining how the second wave caught most of the world by surprise.

Summary

This section departed from a definition of the re-surge of COVID-19 in Sweden during fall 2020 as a reputational threat against the PHA, since the development forces the agency to reverse an earlier announcement and thus risk signaling to its stakeholders that it has made a mistake. When analyzing how the PHA (via Byfors and Tegnell) relates to said threat in its communication, several interesting tendencies can be observed. I argue that Tegnell's and Byfors' confirmations that the development has taken a different turn than the PHA expected during fall can be interpreted as admissions that the agency has been mistaken in its prognosis. However, it is never acknowledged without disclaimers and extenuations. Either the spread depends on factors the PHA could not foresee, and the entire world was mistaken, or Sweden is still doing relatively well because we (read: thanks to the PHA) have been prepared. Sweden is even doing well although there are numbers telling us otherwise. This is also visible in how both representatives display an unwillingness to use the term "*second wave*", giving it an almost symbolical bearing.

7.3.3 b) The face masks

Kategoria

The issue of face masks is one of the most debated in Sweden throughout the pandemic and the debate culminates on December 18th when the PHA announces guidelines for wearing face masks during rush hour in public transport. Until now, the PHA has remained unwilling to recommend face masks outside healthcare settings, why these new guidelines may be interpreted as a reversal of an earlier policy path by the press and public (which also becomes evident in later media reports). As established, such reversals risk implying to stakeholders that the earlier approach was insufficient or based on a misjudgment. Added to this must also be that Sweden was one of the last countries in the world to introduce some form of face mask-recommendation, which may further strengthen that impression. The launch of this new recommendation can, from this perspective, be thought to generate the following implicit kategoria: a) the PHA was wrong in its understanding of face masks and b) was late in realizing that, and c) this shortcoming creates public confusion and anger. This arguably poses a threat against the PHA's competence and knowledge, which in extension risks

altering the public perception of its ability to handle the crisis, but also its perceived goodwill among the public and the press.

Three factors make this particular situation interesting to study. First, the issue of face masks is, as mentioned, hotly debated. Thus, when announced, this decision can be expected by the PHA to generate strong reactions and potential critique. Second, the PHA *itself* has afterward denied that this should be seen as a change in approach or understanding of face masks. Nevertheless, it has been frequently described in the media and public discourse as such. Who is accurate in their depiction is of secondary interest to this study, but the conflicting reports actualizes a need to find out what narrative the PHA has attempted to communicate around this particular issue. Third, what matters at the end of the day is how the situation is perceived by involved audiences. Thus, the mere risk of being perceived as having been wrong or misinformed should *eo ipso* pose a noticeable threat to the PHA, that – as mentioned – to a large extent bases its organizational trustworthiness on knowledge and expertise.

Apologia

The new face mask-recommendation is announced on a press conference that the PHA – here represented by Director General Johan Carlson – holds together with the Government on December 18th (PC6). It is presented as one out of several new recommendations, with reason of the increasingly severe epidemiological situation in Sweden. Carlson initiates the announcement as follows:

> *"The Public Health Agency now also **updates** the national guidelines for face masks in certain crowded environments. Face masks can, according to the WHO **and** the agency's perception, be relevant in environments where crowding **cannot** be avoided […]"*
>
> (PC6 [17:06-17:20])

Carlson then explains that the guidelines will only concern public transport during rush-hour. Noteworthy is that they are described as an "*update*"; an interesting choice of wording in this

context, considering the absence of already existing recommendations to be updat*ed*[19], and that it arguably communicates a softer transmission from A to B than, say, "*introduce*".

Moving on, with the above presented public discourse surrounding face masks in mind, I argue it is reasonable to assume that the PHA understands there might be confusion accompanied with the recommendation now being presented. However, this dimension remains unaddressed by Carlson. It is nevertheless brought up in the questions he receives about face masks (five in total). The citation below provides a rather straightforward example:

> "*Face masks; you have been **against** it for a rather long time. What has **changed**?"*
>
> (Ekot, P6 [23:05-23:09])

The journalist's claim is denied by Carlson, who gives the following explanation:

> "*No, we have **not been against it.** We have held **exactly** that approach that there is a risk with face masks becoming a shortcut to avoid the **large and important** issue / **the distance**. What we can see out in **Europe** is that face masks have **not had any large effect** because / the counter-forces become rather strong since people lose focus on keeping distance. **We** have instead attempted to identify small sectors where we have tried **everything** there is. There, we can add face masks. […]* ."
>
> (Carlson, PC6 [23:09-24:03])

Prima facie, Carlson's reply appears somewhat inconsistent. Especially the first part; the PHA has never been against face masks, but has always viewed them as potentially counter-productive. However, when put together with the remaining part, Carlson seemingly implies that it is rather the face mask-usage of other countries "*out in Europe*" that the PHA has been "*against*". *Ergo*, it is not the PHA's view on face masks that is different; the now presented recommendation has been compatible with its staked-out strategy all along. What is different is that Sweden will be applying its *own*, more minimalistic approach in which the main

[19] The Swedish verb "*uppdatera*", used by Carlson in the original quotation, is defined by SAOL (2015) as "*complementing with current information*" which also presumes the existence of an object to perform the act of updating on.

strategy remains and face masks are added as a last resort in where nothing more can be done to reduce crowding.

All Carlson's remaining answers regarding face masks practically follow the same structure and logic as the one above. This is also true for his response when asked whether he understands that a lot of Swedes who have been worried about not having face masks in Sweden might be angry about that it has taken so long to come around to making this recommendation (The Local, PC6 [50:27-50:52]):

> *"I'm not quite sure that you are right there. Out of* ***logical*** *reasons // which also the WHO points out / we need to find* ***areas****, situations where the face masks make a difference […]. It is* ***not*** *a // general recommendation to use face masks on and off / outdoors and indoors […]. Because, as I explained, in other situations it could rather hamper our efforts to contain the disease […] and I think it's a very common phenomena* ***out in the world****,* ***if you look at North America for example*** *where a lot of focus has been on face masks. Very little focus has been on the big gatherings of people // there. But […] it's the big gatherings that is the problem so* ***we try to focus very thoroughly on what is important***".
>
> (Carlson, PC6 [50:52-52:17])

As a reminder, the question Carlson replies to concerns a) people's reaction to b) a perceived (and protracted) change in the PHA's strategy. Carlson avoids addressing both these aspects in his answer and instead returns to explaining the logic behind the decision again. If anything, implying that there is no reason to be angry with the new face mask-recommendation because it is logical. Thereafter, he once again makes one seemingly uncalled for comparison of Sweden's approach to that of other countries. Understated is that the strategies and epidemiological situations of those geographical areas are undesirable and something that the PHA – who as opposed to them "*focus very thoroughly on what is important*" – distances itself from. Ultimately, the actual question remains unanswered, and the potential problems with what is perceived as a change in policy in a debated question remain unacknowledged.

Summary

The threat against the PHA was here said to lie in a risk of the new face mask-recommendation to be interpreted by its stakeholders as a policy change (*reversal*) and in extension as a sign of incompetence. Carlson's response to this, both during the initial announcement and the questions, can arguably be interpreted as an interest in *not* having it defined as a policy change. Although apparent from the journalists' questions that at least parts of the general public most likely will perceive it as one, Carlson avoids acknowledging any of the potential problems with contradiction, confusion or emotion it may cause. Instead, when the press claims something has changed in the PHA's approach, Carlson time and again turns to explaining the logic behind the new recommendation and in a complicated way clarify how face masks have been compatible with the PHA's strategy all along[20]. The implicit kategoria embedded in this situation can thus be said to be met with *denial,* both explicitly, and implicitly via Carlson's re-framing of the accusation via logical reasoning.

Moreover, another prominent feature of Carlson's responses is to explain that there indeed are and always have been aspects of face mask-usage to be skeptical about, but point at other countries' allegedly dysfunctional approaches to exemplify what those may be. These comparisons, intentionally or not, work to enhance the advantages with the PHA's own suggested approach. In extension it also highlights its own competence and insight; as opposed to "*others*", the PHA knows that masks only work as a last resort, and that they do not reduce the importance of distance.

[20] Here, it should be mentioned for the sake of nuance that my analysis of other, *earlier* press conferences gives the PHA at least to some extent right in this claim. The issue of face masks is brought up at most press conferences here presented; never fully depreciated by the PHA's representatives. To give an example, Byfors states November 10th that masks are and have been on the table for the PHA all the time [PC2 1:05:24-1:05:32]. Whether this is representative for all press conferences and statements made by the PHA is not possible to determine but the overall, albeit superficial, impression is that if any potential shift in position from *against*,- to *for* face masks has taken place, it has done so successively and not over-night. Whether that observation is accurate is up to another study to find out, however.

8. Results

8.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter aimed to observe and describe how the PHA rhetorically addresses reputational threats that present themselves in connection to its crisis communication. In the upcoming chapter the observations will be summarized in terms of recurring patterns and tendencies. These will be discussed systematically in connection to the study's two theoretical frameworks presented earlier and ultimately serve to provide this thesis with its conclusion. Before that, however, a reminder of what this study has aimed to find out is in order. Its overarching research question was as familiar:

- *How does the Swedish Public Health Agency rhetorically address reputational threats in its communication about the COVID-19 pandemic?*

And, presuming any such efforts can be identified which I by now deem is the case:

RQ1: *In what situations does the PHA address reputational threats?*

- More specifically, situations in terms of outright criticism or acts of reversal.

RQ2: *What strategies are used?*

- That is, strategies in terms of measures used to address reputational threats in relation to Benoit's typology (IRT).

RQ3: *What kind of threats provoke a response from the PHA?*

- In respect to what the threats concern and where they originate from.

Thus, to achieve an easy-to-follow line of reasoning, the impending discussion will take the form of answers to these three questions one at a time.

8.2 In what situations does the PHA address reputational threats?

One of the aims of this study has been to explore the applicability of the framework of *Bureaucratic Reputation Theory* (BRT) for analyzing the reputational aspect of a public organization's communication regarding an external, large-scaled crisis. BRT theorizes that public organizations' behavior must be understood in relation to various *reputational threats*, defined as *allegations* and/or *incidents* that in some way risk shedding negative light on the organization in question. Thus, the above analysis has oriented itself around five critical points in time, or situations, in the record of the Swedish PHA's management of COVID-19. The situations and their corresponding press conferences have been chosen on the basis that they can be assumed to encapsulate reputational threats in the form of one or several accusations, *kategoria*, against the PHA's character. Consequently, they have been assumed to enable the identification of potential rhetorical defense-strategies, *apologia*, used by the PHA in its crisis communication. This selection, in turn, has been guided by two criteria derived from the BRT-literature's description of what makes a reputational threat for a public organization; *criticism* (situations where the PHA have been publicly questioned or criticized by an external party) and *acts of reversal* (situations where something seemingly changes in the PHA's approach). The subsequential kategoria-analyses following each situation have then been discussed in terms of which dimension of the PHA's reputation, or ethos, that can be said to be at stake (the PHA's competence, moral or knowledge) and whether the accusations are explicit or implicit.

As for the instances of *criticism* against the PHA that have been studied, these come from different sources of various character, but all follow a red thread in that they refer to the widespread societal dissemination of the virus in Sweden and/or the relatively high death-rates, including the introduction of the virus at retirement homes that have followed. Thus, the critique has mainly been directed toward the PHA's competence, but implicitly also its moral. Moving on, the situations that were assumed to encapsulate *acts of reversal* on the PHA's account indirectly contain implicit accusations that the agency has in one way or another been mistaken. The situations chosen for analysis have circulated around two issues. First, a second wave of COVID-19 during the fall of 2020 which went against the PHA's earlier prognoses. Second, the introduction of face mask-recommendations in public transport during rush-hours that came after a long public debate regarding the PHA's hesitancy to introduce such measures. These situations were thought to raise questions about the PHA's competence and

knowledge, and in the case of face-masks also its compassion. The PHA's communication in these cases has been analyzed as the reaction to an implicit but mediated accusation implying that unacceptable mistakes have been made.

Finally, the sub-analyses of each selected situation's corresponding apologia – where the focus lies on whether and how the PHA addresses the emerging accusations – all identify interesting examples of what can be classified as attempts at rhetorical defense on the PHA's account. This concerns both accusations forwarded by external actors in the form of publicly noticed criticism and implicit accusations that can be assumed to emerge via acts of reversal. To clarify, all situations studied found examples of how the PHA uses various kinds of rhetorical self-defense in most cases when it *must* address a reputational threat (because it is directly confronted with questions regarding its strategy, statements or actions). What this means more specifically, what kind of defense-strategies the PHA uses and how it varies will be the topics of the following sections.

8.3 What strategies are used?

Another analytical aim of this study was to explore the applicability of the apologia-based framework of IRT in a societal crisis communication-setting. This section will therefore discuss the findings made in the study's subsequential apologia-analyses. More specifically, it will discuss the tendencies and patterns observed in the PHA's reactions in relation to Benoit's typology of rhetorical image repair strategies. To repeat, the IRT-typology is derived from the assumption that attacks (or anticipated attacks) against an image that provoke defense have two components; *blame* and *offensiveness*, based on which Benoit distinguishes between five general strategies where an actor can either deny both, dispute blame, dispute offensiveness, or admit to both. These strategies, in turn divided into eleven subcategories, are supposed to make an exhaustive list of potential image repair approaches[21]. That said, I will in the following *not* attempt to categorize all observations made in the above analysis in accordance to Benoit's typology. Instead, I will use the logic and terminology upon which it is based as a benchmark to systematically reflect upon similarities, differences and interesting nuances. I will do so by discussing the PHA's reactions in relation to the general strategies stepwise.

[21] The entirety of the IRT-typology is summarized in **Appendix 1** for the reader who needs an overview.

Mortification

The first overall impression of the PHA's reactions in all situations studied is that it *never fully acknowledges any accusations* embedded in the situation. Neither outspokenly nor indirectly. This is observable in all situations regardless of whether they encapsulate accusations generated by criticism or by acts of reversal. Logically then, the PHA does not apologize for any of them. Thus, one of Benoit's main strategies – *mortification* – can be left without further discussion.

Denial

A few examples can be found of the PHA addressing accusations by denying them entirely. This is the case when it is publicly accused of not having a working strategy ("*First of all, I want to* ***absolutely deny*** *that we wouldn't have a working strategy*", Tegnell, PC1) and when claimed to having been against face masks ("*No, we have* ***not*** *been against it*", Carlson, PC6). This resembles what Benoit refers to as "*simple denial";* claiming that whatever the accusation concerns never happened. One common denominator between these highlighted speech-sets is that they encapsulate reactions to accusations that are relatively abstract or subjective to their nature, thus leaving a certain room for interpretation that make them easier to deny. The accusation of lacking a "*working strategy*" is arguably more difficult to point one's finger to than, say, high death-rates at retirement homes. Another shared feature is that both accusations make out direct threats to the part of the PHA's ethos that is its expertise judgement or competence. More specifically, the face mask-issue since it signals reversal and the strategy-issue because it originates from fellow scientists. In the latter case, where there is an explicit sender, the denial is also followed by an attack against its trustworthiness (similar to what Benoit calls "*attack accuser*"). The denial regarding face masks is instead followed by an attempt to frame it as a logical and coherent step in the PHA's already existing strategy, which highlights the advantages of the own approach as compared to other countries' (*transcendence*).

Evading responsibility

Efforts to shift parts of the alleged responsibility elsewhere are, for example, visible in the accusations from 22 scientists and the Corona Commission regarding the PHA's ability to protect the elderly. Here, the problematic situation at retirement homes is acknowledged but other actors or factors are pointed out as ultimately responsible ("*then it is up to ehm / the* ***executive chiefs*** *and so on to implement these changes",* Byfors, PC4). (See also Tegnell

(PC1), describing the situation as "*a problem that goes **way back** which I don't think we would have been able to solve in a few weeks' time"*). This seemingly falls under what the IRT-typology classifies either as *provocation*; to claim that others share the blame, or as *defeasibility*; to claim a lack of control over the situation.

Reducing offensiveness

At several occasions the PHA neither denies nor acknowledges any blame in its apologia, but instead attempts to re-frame the accusation at hand to tone down the significance of whatever it may concern. This is visible in several efforts to nuance the accusation by stressing different types of extenuating circumstances. The most apparent examples include the already familiar tendency to *attack the accuser* either by questioning its relevance ("*I have no reason to comment on **that**",* Tegnell, PC5)[22] or questioning its trustworthiness ("*several numbers in that article were incorrect, **unfortunately***", Tegnell, PC1)[23].

Another observable tendency is to offer disclaimers or alternative explanations for whatever the accusation concerns to demonstrate that things are not as bad as they may look.
This is for example visible in Byfors' and Tegnell's respective rhetoric around the second wave. Both more or less explicitly acknowledge that the PHA has been wrong in its prognosis for the fall, but not *that* wrong. In the IRT-framework this resembles the strategy of "*minimization*"; downplaying the number of negative effects associated with the situation ("*we are finding more cases than we thought we would, because we are **testing** more",* Byfors, PC2*; "Well, it is probably true but must be put into its **context**.",* Tegnell, PC3).
A third form of observed attempts at shaping its audiences' understanding of the situation at hand resembles what Benoit calls "*bolstering*" – to remind the audience of the PHA's positive sides and past performances. For example, the PHA may have been mistaken in whether Sweden would face a second wave, but the impact of the wave will at least be small because we have "*things in order*" (Tegnell, PC3).

A fourth tendency is to compare the own situation to that of others and that way shift the discussion at hand into a new context. Examples of this are several attempts to take on and discuss the accusation from a different, *international* perspective and compare Sweden to other parts of the world. Either to pinpoint how Sweden's COVID-19 situation is better than

[22] The King's critique.

[23] The 22 scientists.

that of other countries ("*Then, we can look at other countries that have taken very strict measures such as **Belgium"**,* Tegnell, PC1; "*What we can see out in **Europe** is that face masks have **not had any large effect**...*", Carlson, PC6), or to point out that Sweden is at *least not worse* off than any other county. Here referring to the complexity of the pandemic as an extenuating circumstance ("*that is true **not only for Sweden but for practically the entire world** that this pandemic accelerated in a way I think **few** countries could predict",* Tegnell, PC3). Both types seemingly have their counterpart in what Benoit defines as either *differentiation;* comparisons with similar but less desirable examples, or as *transcendence*: placing an accusation in a particularly beneficial frame of reference in a way that reduces its perceived harm.

Corrective action

Examples of *corrective action* – guarantees for that whatever the accusation concerns will not be repeated – are found in Byfors' response to the question about the Corona Commission's critique regarding the elderly ("***several measures** have been taken, and there is more **information** and more knowledge about how the virus is spread",* PC4) or in Tegnell's comment on the King's remark regarding Sweden's fatality-rate ("*we will **absolutely** need to work on understanding what we can improve in order to prevent it from **ever** happening again",* PC5). However, also these comments are followed by some form of disclaimer ("*then it is up to… the **executive chiefs** to implement these changes to make sure it does not happen to embrace the lessons from this spring",* Byfors, PC4; *"but whether one should call it a **failure** or not should be left for **future investigators** to decide*.", Tegnell, PC5).

8.3.1 Summary

In sum, reflecting upon the PHA's communication with help of the IRT-typology has accentuated several notable similarities between Benoit's definitions of rhetorical defense-strategies and the PHA's reactions to what this study has defined as reputational threats. The discussion was initiated with a statement that the overall impression of the PHA's reactions is that it *never fully acknowledges any accusations* embedded in the situation; regardless of whether it encapsulates accusations generated by criticism or by acts of reversal. Most of them are not explicitly denied either, but rather addressed with different kinds of disclaimers. According to the IRT-logic, accusations that are neither fully denied nor acknowledged must either be met with a negotiation of the own responsibility, or a negotiation of the significance

of the event in various ways. In the remainder of the discussion above I have showed that the PHA's reactions seemingly contain traces of both.

However, one additional reflection that needs to be made is that there are aspects that an apologia-discussion based on the logic of IRT does *not* take into consideration. For example, the IRT-framework only captures accusations that are *addressed*. As a result, the most common and prominent reaction of all in the PHA's register almost surpasses unnoticed; the *initial silence*. In none of the situations studied is the PHA the one to address the "*elephant in the room*". This is an interesting finding considering that, as was mentioned in the theory-chapter, the usual (normative) assumption in crisis communication literature is that the most efficient strategy is for the communicator to take control over the narrative quickly and voluntarily admit to any form of accusation before someone else brings it up. Still, the most common strategy initially and over time is to remain silent. It is even more interesting considering the format of the press conferences where, as established, the PHA has a unique possibility to control what is being highlighted and how.

8.4 What kind of threats provoke a response from the PHA?

This study has no quantitative ambitions as in trying to describe any relative frequencies of the PHA's reactions and defense-strategies. Yet, I deem it important to take into consideration nuances and not treat the different situations studied and their corresponding reactions as a homogenous mass. That said, the PHA's responses discussed in the preceding section showcase several reoccurring patterns, but they also display interesting case-to-case variations. These can be summarized as follows; when the PHA reacts to implicit accusations directed toward its character, it seems to matter *what* the accusations are about in the formulation of the response. When the PHA reacts to publicly articulated accusations directed toward its character, it seems to matter *what* the accusations are about and to some extent also *where* they come from. I will here discuss what I mean with "*what*" and "*where*" in this context on one term at a time.

What

Each situation that has been subject for analysis here has been chosen based on an assumption that it contains a set of kategoria – also discussed as accusations or threats – defined as *allegations* and/or *incidents* that in some way risk shedding negative light on the PHA. These accusations have been presented and reflected upon with a focus on towards which part of the PHA's reputation, or character (ethos) they are directed; the PHA's competence, moral or knowledge. In the case of "*what*", then, the overall impression of analyzing the PHA's reactions to said accusations is that those directed toward the PHA's competence or knowledge are the ones that trigger the seemingly largest need for defense. This concerns situations where the accusations are forwarded by critics as well as when generated implicitly from an alleged act of reversal. Put differently; in situations that entail threats toward the PHA's knowledge, competence *and* its moral, the reactions tend to be focused on the two former aspects. Meanwhile, the moral aspect, usually implicit to its character, is either met with an acknowledgement and a following promise of improvement, as visible in the response to the Corona Commission's critique regarding the elderly (PC4; PC5) or the King's remark about the death-rates ("*It is **of course** so that the deaths in Sweden are // **deeply regrettable** and we will **absolutely** need to work on understanding what we can improve in order to prevent it from **ever** happening again",* Tegnell, PC5). Others are left more or less unaddressed. The most illustrative example of this being Carlson's response when asked whether he understands that people will be angry with the new face mask-recommendation and he avoids answering to instead focus on explaining its logic ("*I'm not quite sure that you are right there. Out of **logical** reasons…",* PC6). Another dimension of this, which is especially apparent in this last example, is the PHA's use of language with its relative absence of emotionally charged language and explicit remorse. In rhetorical terms it can be expressed as that the PHA-representatives tend to focus on *logos* and *ethos* in their communication, rather than *pathos.*

In the meantime, accusations that mainly threaten the PHA's competence or expertise are seemingly more urgent for the PHA to defend itself against. Accusations regarding such shortcomings are either met with denial, counter-accusations or alternative explanations. For example, this is visible in how the implicit accusation that the PHA would have been wrong in its judgement about a second wave is more or less acknowledged but *not* without disclaimers (Byfors, PC2; Tegnell, PC3). Another observable tendency is that the PHA frequently *uses* its ethos as expert as a means of defense in itself. This is perceptible in how

its representatives in various ways stress their insight and knowledge in the matter of COVID-19 as an insurance that the situation is not as bad as it may appear. Examples mentioned earlier include comparing Sweden to other parts of the world to stress either the pandemic's complexity (Tegnell, PC1) or the advantages with the Swedish strategy as opposed to that of other countries (Carlson, PC6).

Where

This aspect concerns the situations where the accusations have been forwarded by an external party in the form of publicly noticed critique. The most apparent difference here lies in that while the King and the 22 scientists are met with counter-accusations that reduces their claims' relevance, the Corona Commission's critique remains unquestioned. Rather, it is met with openness, acknowledgement and promises of improvement (although, as mentioned, also with a disclaimer). Why this is and whether it has to do with the sender or rather the content of the accusations cannot be established by a study of this kind. However, as discussed in the accompanying kategoria-analysis, the Corona Commission's critique is arguably the most potentially harmful to the PHA in the long term. While the other two sources of criticism act on their own initiative, the Corona Commission has been assigned the particular mission to scrutinize the Swedish COVID-19 management by the PHA's principal; the Government, and will thus most likely have an impact in the upcoming aftermath and accountability-phase of the pandemic.

8.4.1 Summary

In sum, I have in this section presented case-to-case variations to add nuance to the patterns described previously in this analysis. I have argued for and tried to demonstrate that it seems to matter *what* the accusations are directed against and to some extent *where* they come from when analyzing the PHA's rhetorical reactions. Here, it appears as if parallels can be drawn to the framework of Bureaucratic Reputation Theory (BRT) that has been utilized to localize the situations and following accusations studied. It was mentioned in the theory-chapter that a key assumption of BRT is that how public organizations manage or prevent threats against their reputation is based on a perception of the own organizational identity; another that organizations are unwilling to be perceived as having been wrong.

Moreover, previous BRT-studies of how public organizations respond to public allegations show that they construct their response in accordance to the relative reputational threat they pose to the own organization as in that "*more threatening*" allegations tend to trigger responses to a greater extent. In the PHA's case, then, this goes in line with how its behavior seemingly corresponds with the identity as an expert agency whose ethos to a large extent is based on knowledge and fit for the task at hand, as well as with the relative threat posed by its different critics. However, these reflections – albeit interesting – are impossible to draw any meaningful conclusions from, since this study lacks insight regarding the PHA's representatives' actual motivations to respond the way they do. That is left for future scholars to investigate. The central lesson from this section is instead that more or less all threats analyzed here trigger a response by the PHA, but that they also *vary* in type and degree.

9. Conclusion

With this study I have aimed to explore the communicative aspect of how the Swedish PHA manages its organizational reputation under ongoing management of an external crisis by answering the overall research question:

- *How does the Swedish Public Health Agency rhetorically address reputational threats in its communication about the COVID-19 pandemic?*

This question was then divided into three sub-questions:

RQ1: *In what situations does the PHA address reputational threats?*

- More specifically, situations in terms of outright criticism or acts of reversal.

RQ2: *What strategies are used?*

- That is, strategies in terms of measures to address reputational threats in relation to Benoit's typology (IRT).

RQ3: *What kind of threats provoke a response from the PHA?*

- In respect to what the threats concern and where they originate from.

To generate an answer to these queries I have conducted a rhetorical analysis according to the logic of accusation and defense. The framework IRT was used to identify and discuss the PHA's various reactions to such threats, and the framework of BRT was used to localize and discuss the threats in question with help of two criteria; publicly noticed critique and acts of reversal. The results of this analysis were then discussed in relation to the three questions above. Now, this study has reached the point where it is time to summarize its findings and conclude what has been found out.

9.1 In what situations does the PHA address reputational threats? (**RQ1**)

This study has analyzed five situations and six corresponding press conferences. Three situations were chosen based on that they concerned publicly noticed critique against the PHA (the 22 scientists, the Corona Commission, the King), and two on the basis that they concern issues where the PHA has allegedly reversed a previous statement or policy path (the second wave, the face masks). All situations studied were found to contain examples of the PHA using various rhetorical defense-strategies when confronted by direct questions regarding its statements or actions. *The answer to the first sub-question* (**RQ1**) is thus that the PHA addresses reputational threats in situations connected to both outright criticism and to acts of reversal.

9.2 What strategies are used? (**RQ2**)

By discussing the PHA's reactions in relation to IRT, this study found several reoccurring patterns in the agency's communicative output that go in line with the definitions provided by Benoit's IRT-typology. It also found behaviors *not* included in the typology; mainly the tendency not to address an accusation until it is brought up by someone else (in this case, a journalist). The insights from this discussion can be summarized as *an answer to the second research question* (**RQ2**) the following way: the most prominent strategy employed by the PHA is seemingly to a) employ initial silence and b) *never fully acknowledge an accusation;* if it is not denied, it is followed by a "*but*", either as in toning down the own blame or the accusation's offensiveness. The end-result is an apologia that is somewhat Janus-faced; the accusations are partly acknowledged but are in the same breath partly questioned, or their significance reduced.

9.3 What kind of threats provoke a response from the PHA? (**RQ3**)

Although indicators of rhetorical defense have been possible to observe in all situations, this study also noted interesting case-to-case variations. Accusations directed toward the PHA's competence and knowledge appears to trigger the greatest need for self-defense and disclaimers as opposed to those touching upon the moral aspect of its ethos. Moreover, reactions to accusations originating from explicit critique seemingly vary with the relative threat it poses to the PHA. It was reflected upon that both these findings go in line with the theorizations of how public organizations relate to reputational threats in the BRT-literature; in accordance to reputational cost but also the own organizational identity. *Thus, the answer*

to the third question (**RQ3**) is: whether, but mainly *how* the PHA responds to threats seemingly depends on *what* it concerns and from *where* it originates. *Ergo*, the PHA shows no unison pattern in its apologias, but factors such as sender and content seemingly play a significant role, and must thus be taken into consideration in a discussion of rhetorical responses to what can be classified as reputational threats.

9.4 Summary

In essence, the three answers presented above provide the overarching research question with its conclusion. In fine: from what this study can tell, when the Swedish Public Health Agency rhetorically addresses reputational threats in its communication about the COVID-19 pandemic, it defends itself.

10. Discussion

10.1 Implications

This study has aimed at mapping out indicators of "*double focus*" in the Swedish Public Health Agency's crisis communication – fulfilling its mission as crisis manager *and* protecting its organizational image – by analyzing its communicative output, but it has also aimed to explore new respective areas of use for the frameworks of Image Repair Theory (IRT) and Bureaucratic reputation Theory (BRT). The typology of IRT was used to identify and discuss the rhetorical defense-strategies applied by the PHA, but also to explore its applicability to the discourse surrounding an ongoing societal crisis. In sum, making use of IRT and its conceptual apparatus in this context can be said to having been of great value, as it enabled a systematic, although *perhaps not exhaustive*, identification and reflection of what may be interpreted as rhetorical defense against reputational threats in the PHA's communication. Moving on, the framework and terminology of BRT was used to localize and discuss what kind of reputational threats may provoke a response from a public organization (criticism, acts of reversal) and to guide the selection of material, but also to further explore the framework's applicability in a crisis communication-setting. Considering the results, also this seems to have been a fruitful endeavor. These insights have, I argue, several noteworthy implications.

First, this study's perhaps most important finding is the possibilities and value of applying classical, apologia-based crisis communication-frameworks (accusation and defense) in a public crisis communication-setting. This accentuates a promising potential of using such theories to study not only outright trust-crises, but *also* to increase the understanding for the many challenges faced by actors that manage crises of the external, societal type. The findings also expose an until now overlooked aspect of crisis communication, and challenge prevailing assumptions within the literature of what type of crisis communication-practice and corresponding theories belongs to what context.

Second, and connected to the first implication, this study also adds knowledge to the literature of BRT. More specifically, to the yet relatively underexplored research-area of reputation management as communication in general, and to the even less explored area of qualitative BRT-studies in particular. Moreover, its findings go in line with Christensen & Laegreid's (2020) study of the Norwegian COVID-19 management, which contests what this study

described as a prevailing understanding of public organizations' reputation-oriented ambitions as secondary to the obligation of serving the public good when a crisis strikes. From what this study can tell, public organizations can focus on both aspects simultaneously. My findings thus add nuance to the current understanding in crisis communication-literature of how public organizations function and prioritize. This is not to claim that BRT provides a more accurate understanding of public organizations than any other framework, but for scholars interested in studying their behavior or communicative efforts it points out the importance to consider that there are several ways to do so.

10.2 Limitations

I will here reflect upon three limitations with this study that I find particularly important.

One first limitation of this study is that it only analyzes a restricted number of situations from one crisis, one channel and one organization; it remains to be found out whether similar observations can be made elsewhere. Rhetorical analyses take into account that texts are a product of their specific situation. Thus, there are things to consider when reflecting upon how this study's findings are bound to their source, context and time. First, the communication analyzed is performed in a milieu that in several ways is unique, mainly regarding the role, the platform and influence held by the public organization studied. Not only has the press conference-format granted the PHA a direct channel to the press and public with independent control over the format of its communication; parts of the explanation lie in the Swedish cultural context, with its special view on public organizations and high levels of institutional trust. For a discussion regarding this study's findings to be more meaningful, they would need points of comparison. Moreover, this study can say nothing about the efficiency or otherwise of the PHA's communication in terms of its effect on public opinion and compliance. I can, however, only assume that an abundance of such data will be available when this pandemic eventually reaches its aftermath-phase, regarding not only the PHA or Sweden. Therefore, I see large potential in combining the analytical framework of this study with a comparative approach. First of all, cross-organizational, - or national comparisons could enable researchers to identify the conditions under which the here proposed theoretical relationships hold, and those in which they do not. The COVID-19 pandemic offers a unique opportunity to compare simultaneous efforts of crisis communication conducted either by several public organizations with different roles, or in several countries with varying cultural

and structural conditions and accompanying reputational threats. Moreover, comparing trends in public opinion or compliance to track what strategies seem to work and what strategies do not, can lead to important organizational learning for the next time a similar crisis strikes (which, according to the WHO at least, most certainly will happen (TT 2020c)).

Second, this study has only focused on how the PHA reacts to reputational threats during press conferences. This was a conscious choice based on limitations in scope and the opportunity to study potential reputation-protection *in action.* However, as mentioned, the communicative output produced by the PHA is not limited to the press conferences, since its representatives have answered questions in other medial contexts throughout this period as well. Analyzing the PHA's performances across channels would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how the dynamics of accusation and defense are dependent on the format and the PHA's ability to control the agenda. Moreover, as has been noted briefly at several occasions, the emergence of *social media* has opened up a new direct channel between the public and crisis communicating organizations and thus paved the way for new crises, new reputational threats and potentially also new defense strategies. This has not been taken into consideration in this study. Here, future scholars can make several important contributions to both of this study's theoretical frameworks by exploring how public organizations address potential reputational threats in dialogue with citizens on social media and also by localizing exactly what these threats are.

Third, this study's conclusions regarding the PHA's behavior or choices of expression, and the theorizations regarding its underlying driving forces, are – due to the choice of material and method – restricted to mine as an analyst's interpretations of the PHA's communicative output. Moreover, it has not taken into consideration the characteristics or interests of the PHA-representatives on whose speech-acts its conclusions are based. These findings would therefore need to be confirmed or developed via interviews with the representatives studied here or other key figures behind the PHA's communication-plan for the course of the pandemic. Such research would not only provide a better understanding for why the PHA communicates the way it does and how the organization's employees actually relate to the concept of reputation; it could also help distinguish what in the observed rhetorical patterns that are part of the organization's communicative strategy at large, and what is seemingly tied to the individual representatives.

10.3 Concluding remarks

This thesis has been devoted to investigating how the Swedish Public Health Agency defends itself against reputational threats in its communication regarding the COVID-19 pandemic during the year of 2020. I have with the help of Bureaucratic Reputation Theory demonstrated a possible way to localize reputational threats to organizational image (as generated by explicit critique or by acts of reversal) in the discourse around an ongoing societal crisis, and with the help of Image Repair Theory also demonstrated a possible way to localize what may be interpreted as communicative strategies of defense against said threats.

The aim of this study has *not* been to criticize the practices of the Swedish PHA. It takes no stance in neither the efficiency nor the moral value of the tendencies found. Rather, the goal has been to highlight what was identified as a knowledge-gap in the crisis communication-literature, and explore the possibilities and advantages with using Image Repair Theory and Bureaucratic Reputation Theory to study a dimension of crisis communication where current literature has not yet realized their relevance. Neither does this study and its findings contest the claim of previous scholars that public organizations' crisis communication is highly complex and faces challenges that go beyond any reputation-oriented ambitions. If anything, these findings add even more complexity to the calculation. Not only are public organizations in "*crisis mode*" bound to a mission to provide people with the information necessary to ensure their own safety in a context where nothing is certain and stakes are high; they must also fend off threats to their reputation that, as phrased by Benoit, are "*inevitable and frequently occurring*", at the same time.

They are, to say the least, under pressure.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 - The Image Repair Typology according to Benoit (2020)

General strategies		Subcategories	
Denial	Deny problem or responsibility	**Simple denial**	Did not do what accused of
		Shift blame	Place blame on another
Evade responsibility	No denial but toning down or shifting responsibility	**Provocation**	Caused by act of another/others share the blame
		Defeasibility	Lack of information or control
		Accident	Mishap, external factors
		Good intentions	Meant well
Reduce offensiveness	No denial but toning down significance	**Bolstering**	Stressing good qualities of self, remind of previous performances
		Minimization	Downplaying negative effects
		Differentiation	Reframing as less offensive than similar
		Transcendence	Reframing by placing in more positive context
		Attack Accuser	Questioning source of accusation's credibility or moral
		Compensation	Reimbursing victims
Corrective action	Promise to solve problem or prevent recurrence	-	-
Mortification	Full admission and apology	-	-

Source: Benoit (2020,108); Vigsø (2016,43).

Appendix 2 - List over press conferences selected for analysis

PC1: Folkhälsomyndigheten Sverige (14-04-2020). *Pressträff om covid-19 (coronavirus) 14 april 2020.* [video]. YouTube.
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgcDLWD0PFY

PC2: Folkhälsomyndigheten Sverige (10-11-2020). *Pressträff om covid-19 (coronavirus) 10 november 2020.* [video]. YouTube.
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=maPFLkwIfSI

PC3: Folkhälsomyndigheten Sverige (12-11-2020). *Pressträff om covid-19 (coronavirus) 12 november 2020.* [video]. YouTube.
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PC4: Folkhälsomyndigheten Sverige (15-12-2020). *Pressträff om covid-19 (coronavirus) 15 december 2020.* [video]. YouTube.
Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PAWYImTAYAA

PC5: Folkhälsomyndigheten Sverige (17-12-2020). *Pressträff om covid-19 (coronavirus) 17 december 2020*. [video]. YouTube.
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PC6: Regeringskansliet (18-12-2020). *Digital pressträff med statsministern 18 december 2020*. [video]. YouTube.
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Appendix 3 - Timeline

To give a better timely comprehension of the issues that work as a foundation for the selected press conferences, presented in chapter 6 – Material, these are summarized in a timeline below where key-dates and events are presented in chronological order. All dates concern the year of 2020:

March 11th

The WHO officially declares COVID-19 a pandemic.

April 14th

The 22 Swedish scientists publish their critical debate article.

June 30th

The Corona Commission is formed to evaluate the Swedish COVID-19 strategy.

July 21st

Three scenarios forecasting the continued spread of COVID-19 are presented by the PHA. A classical second wave is deemed unlikely.

November 10th

Regional recommendations are introduced in 15 of Sweden's 22 regions.

November 12th

Regional recommendations are introduced in additionally 2 regions. State Epidemiologist Tegnell answers in the affirmative when asked if Sweden currently finds itself in a second wave.

December 15th

The Corona Commission presents its first report.

December 16th

The Swedish King considers Sweden's COVID-19 strategy a failure.

December 18th

Guidelines for face masks in public transport during rush-hours are announced.