

**Innovating in the German Public Sector:  
How a Think Tank Frames the Debate on NPM**

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### **Preface**

Innovations in the public sector don't sell themselves, particularly as bureaucracy is often criticized for being overly resistant to change. Neither the attributes of the innovation, nor the characteristics of those who adopt it, provide sufficient explanation for whether an innovation is adopted or not. Rather, the innovation becomes widespread only after being articulated and advocated by someone who strives to persuade potential adopters. *Rick Vogel* and *Jetta Frost* analyze this process of persuasion by means of a case study on the German public sector in which a think tank was and continues to be the leading reform promoter. The focal innovation is a model of managerial control in accordance with guiding principles of New Public Management. The authors refer to the process (by which the think tank has championed this model) as framing and trace accordant frames – i.e., interpretive stances towards underlying problems and appropriate solutions – by means of an in-depth textual analysis of reports, surveys and journal articles. They reveal a multi-faceted narrative that has served as script for public sector transformation in Germany. The results suggest that innovations in the public sector, as inherently persuasive as they may be, need rhetorical accompaniment by influential actors to become widespread.

### **Abstract**

We investigate the innovation function of a think tank in the course of modernization of the German public sector. Our focus is on the framing strategy the think tank pursues in order to disseminate new knowledge. We select publications released by the think tank and conduct a textual analysis on them in order to reveal the frames for which they serve as vehicles. Three stages of the framing process can be distinguished: frame breaking, construction and adjustment. With the support of framing strategies, the focal think tank triggers the application of an innovative management concept, labelled New Steering Model.

**Keywords:** think tanks; framing; case study; New Public Management; New Steering Model; Germany; bibliometrics

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### **Introduction**

The resistance of public organizations to innovation has been explored in great depth in established research. For example, such excess inertia is captured by terms such as ‘bureaucratic dysfunctions’ (Blau, 1955), ‘machine bureaucracy’ (Mintzberg, 1979) and ‘bureaucratic vicious circle’ (Crozier, 1964). Of course, the mechanisms leading organizations into ‘learning myopia’ and ‘competency traps’ are not exclusive to public organizations (for a brief overview see Lee, Lee and Lee, 2003).

In the literature on organizational learning, the general tendency to overinvest in the utilization of already existing knowledge – to the detriment of the production of new knowledge – is described as an universal threat to organizations (Levinthal and March, 1993; March, 1991). However, in the absence of competitive pressure, as is the case across wide swathes of the public sector, this self-reinforcing process can be assumed to be more virulent than in other fields.

At the same time, the widely non-competitive environment in the public sector offers conditions under which *think tanks* can perform an innovation function to resolve structural inertia of public agencies. Since public agencies do not strive for competitive advantage, they are not forced to develop an inimitable stock of knowledge. Therefore, in the public sector, it is not so difficult for knowledge to become a public good with open access as it is in the private sector. Thus, public agencies can use a shared source of new ideas and concepts without risking their survival. As we illustrate in this case study, think tanks may serve as such a source of innovation. Generally, think tanks are non-profit private and public organizations which examine and analyse controversial social and economic issues in an explorative manner and disseminate their various knowledge products, which are targeted at individuals or organizations, *i.e.* in politics, administration, and business (Thunert, 2004). We investigate the strategies think tanks have developed to disseminate new ideas and concepts in an organizational field. We argue that think tanks make use of *frames* to complete this mission. Relying on framing theory, we examine their *framing strategies* to face the structural inertia of public agencies.

To substantiate our arguments we conducted a single-case study on a think tank which has been a leading reform promoter in the modernization of the German public sector. This think tank is a professional association of agencies on the municipal level, called *Joint Agency of Local Governments*. The case setting is the international movement of *New Public Management* (NPM) of which the concept promoted by the focal think tank, called *New Steering Model* (NSM), is the German variant. To investigate how this model has spread among local governments, we first select reports and other publications authored by the think tank and its staff by means of their bibliometric impact. Bibliometrics is the statistical analysis of research publications and their references to each other; its most widely known application is citation analysis. We then apply an

interpretive textual analysis on these publications to reveal the frames for which they serve as vehicles.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: In the next section, we draw more theoretically on framing strategies of think tanks, thus transferring the issue from political science into organization studies. In section three, we briefly sketch the investigated think tank and its background in public sector modernization in Germany. In the subsequent section, we document our data and method. In section five, we present our results by revealing the framing strategy pursued by the focal think tank and we distinguish three stages of the process. In section six, we discuss the results and some recommendations on the potential and actual role of think tanks in fostering innovation in the public sector.

### **Framing Strategies of Think Tanks**

Permanently facing the challenge of putting new knowledge into practice, think tanks pose as strategic actors which transform innovative ideas and concepts into applicable solutions for pressing problems. The most common medium think tanks have at their disposal to advance, share and spread this knowledge is through texts either in a written or unwritten form. Therefore, think tanks' strategies of linking their explorative activities with exploitation in other organizational domains aims to provide the rhetoric and arguments which substantiate and legitimate a certain position and induce the audience to think and judge in a particular way. By doing so, think tanks rely on persuasion and advocacy. They try to set the agenda of discourses and to construct consensual knowledge (Stone, 2002).

The concept of framing presents one way of describing the power of a communication text. Drawing on research in the field of framing, we examine framing strategies by means of which think tanks pursue the goal of making new ideas work. Framing research is a multidisciplinary approach rooted in economics (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979), psychology (Kahneman and Tversky, 1984), sociology (Goffman, 1974), communication (Entman, 1993) and political science (Schön and Rein, 1994). By and large, framing research aims at investigating the reasons why one particular conceptual model, amidst the vast array of options, prevails over others. From this perspective, framing can be understood as a process of discrimination between competing alternatives (Kohler-Koch, 2000). It aims at shaping and altering the interpretations and preferences of the audience, favouring a certain way to deal with an issue.<sup>1</sup>

*Framing strategies* occur through pursuing communication processes that foster the perceived persuasiveness and applicability of supported ideas and concepts, thereby enhancing the probability of their diffusion in practice. During these communication processes think tanks use frames which are conveyed in narratives, thus assuming the shape of texts, and serving as guidelines for changes. According to Rein and Schön, *framing* is “a way of selecting, organising, interpreting, and making sense of a complex reality so as to provide guideposts for knowing, analysing, persuading, and acting. A frame is a perspective from which an amorphous, ill-defined problematic situation can be made sense of and acted upon” (Rein and Schön, 1991: 263). Similarly, Entman, defines ‘*to frame*’ as ‘to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem

definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described' (Entman, 1993: 52).

When we analyse framing strategies we distinguish three stages: the *breaking of an old frame*, the *construction of a new frame* and the *adjustment of this new frame*. This structuring complies with the results of a comparable study by Abolafia (2004; similarly Benford and Snow, 2000) who applies these notions to refer to analytically distinguishable, but actually intertwined stages of a 'framing move.' Although our argument that think tanks implement framing strategies to disseminate innovative knowledge is consistent with existing research, empirical investigations in case study designs remain few and far between (for exceptions see Brophy-Baermann and Bloeser, 2006; Godin, 2004). In the next sections, we present a single-case study on the framing strategy of a think tank which has been a key player in the modernization of the German public sector. We use the above mentioned three stages to examine the case material and elaborate the characteristics of each stage in detail. Previously, we draw a rough portrait of the think tank on which we place our focus.

### **The Case of *Joint Agency of Local Governments* (KGSt)**

The subject of our case study is an association of public agencies at the municipal level, known in Germany as *Kommunale Gemeinschaftsstelle*, or, in English as *Joint Agency of Local Governments*. We will refer to it in the following by its common abbreviation *KGSt*. The *KGSt* developed out of the *German Association of Cities and Towns* and became legally independent in 1951 (Badenhoop, 1961; Mäding, 1975). It is a politically independent non-profit organization which is funded by membership fees. According to its ordinance (*KGSt*, 2005b) as well as mission statement,<sup>2</sup> *KGSt* supports its members in all aspects of public management, aiming at an effective and efficient administration on the local level. In return for their fees, the members (today more than 1,600 local authorities) regularly receive general reports and surveys in the field of management, organization, human resources, accounting and IT. Furthermore, *KGSt* organizes exchanges of experience and benchmarking projects and provides some other knowledge-intensive products like newsletters, handbooks, trainings and web portals. Thus, *KGSt* can be regarded as the centralized self-help institution of local governments in Germany. According to its latest activity report, the staff of *KGSt* consists of some forty full-time employees (*KGSt*, 2005a). Accompanied by investigations in science and practice, the reports and surveys are developed in temporary expert groups. Most of these experts are practitioners from member organizations, but some of them come from other professional fields such as consultancy and higher education. With this unique mode of knowledge production, *KGSt*, by its own account, aims to ensure that its products, visions, models and solutions are oriented to application (*KGSt*, 2005a: 2). Which general topics are on the agenda of *KGSt* is decided by its administrative council which is made up of elected representatives of member agencies.

In terms of set-up and purpose, the *KGSt* is equivalent to the *Public Management and Policy Association* (PMPA) in the UK, the *Association of Public Policy and Management* (APPAM) in the USA or the *Institute of Public Administration of Canada* (IPAC). The reputation of an 'undisputed authority' (Wollmann, 2000: 926) which *KGSt* gained over the first decades of its existence was even strengthened during the modernization of the German public sector in the

1990s. During this time, several driving forces simultaneously made changes in the administrative system imperative. First of all, in the face of dwindling public budgets, the need for budgetary discipline became evident. The pressure to meet the Maastricht criteria made public savings a constant issue in political debates. To a great extent, the budgetary problems were caused by the enormous public expenditures required by the German Unification. Additionally, the public image of state agencies was damaged because the quality of their service delivery progressively failed to meet the increasing demands on public services. Furthermore, the international reform wave of new public management (NPM) especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries could no longer be neglected. Evolving from these environmental dynamics, a climate of change spread out in the public sector and encouraged Germany to join the NPM movement, albeit ten years behind.

During the modernization process of the 1990s (and later), KGSt became a key player with distinct discourse power. As Reichard remarks, 'KGSt has been extremely active in elaborating on more detailed concepts and instruments for a new doctrine of local government management' (Reichard, 2003: 349). It is widely acknowledged that the concept developed and supported by KGSt, called *New Steering Model* (NSM), has become the German variant of NPM. Commentators remark that this model was 'promoted in an almost campaign-like fashion' (Wollmann, 2000: 926) by KGSt and 'disseminated like a bushfire' (Reichard, 2003: 349). Therefore, there can be no doubt that the triumphal procession of NSM 'would not have taken place without the extremely intensive missionary activities of the KGSt' (Reichard, 2003: 351) during the 1990s. We analyse this process as a framing strategy pursued by a think tank. In the next step, we outline the data and method on which our case study is based.

## **Data and Method**

In our case study, we analyse the framing strategy of the focal think tank by extracting it from publications authored either by KGSt (as institutional author) or by its members (as personal authors). As we have outlined above, print products like handbooks, reports, surveys, journal or newspaper articles are among the favourite media that think tanks use for dissemination of knowledge; these are the media the KGSt in particular likes to choose. In the period from 1989 to 2005, KGSt, according to its own information, released 206 official reports or handbooks of this kind (KGSt, 2007). To reduce the number of publications in the analysis, we employed a selection mechanism which is not based on the production, but on the consumption of texts. A text will have no influence at all as long as it remains unnoticed by the audience. Therefore, in terms of publication output, a think tank may be highly productive, yet have little effect. We assumed that the best indicator of effectiveness is the amount of citations a publication gains from the audience of professionals to whom it is devoted. By citing a text, an author demonstrates that he or she draws on its content for his or her own purposes. The more citations a publication receives, the more it is acknowledged by the audience, and the higher is its impact in a discourse. Therefore, citation analysis provides a reliable indication of the impact, both on the level of a single publication and on an aggregated institutional level.

In the database we used to identify the most influential publications in the field there are 892 articles on NPM, taken from nine journals in every second volume from 1989 to 2005. All of the

included media are German journals that specialize in public sector management, most of them targeted at a practitioner audience. The selected articles contain references to 10,245 documents. We ranked these articles in order of their citation frequency and thus identified the twenty-five most frequently cited publications (Table 1). Among these documents, we attributed eight to KGSt due either to institutional (KGSt, 1991, 1992, 1993a, 1993b, 1994a, 1994b) or personal (Banner, 1991, , 1994) authorship. Taking this number, it can be concluded that the publication activity of KGSt was highly effective in influencing the German discourse on NPM in the focal period from 1989 to 2005. The three documents which were by far most frequently cited were all authored by KGSt or its former director Gerhard Banner.

Table 1: Ranking of Publications by Citation Frequency

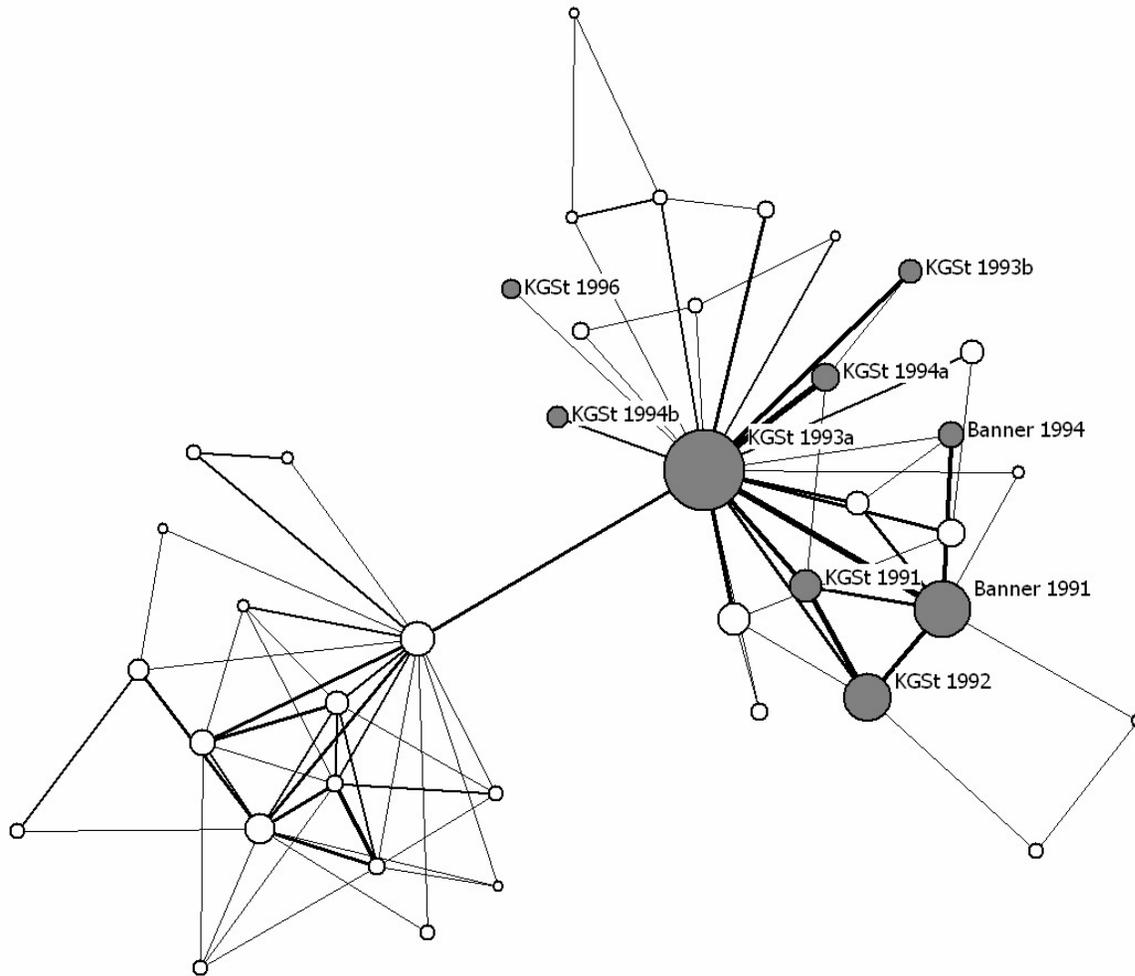
Rank	Publication <sup>a</sup>	Hermeneutic Unit	Citations	Degree <sup>b</sup>	Closeness	Eigenvector
1	KGSt (1993a)	HU1	41	74.863	79.913	21.156
2	Banner (1991)	HU2	28	46.448	64.894	10.280
3	KGSt (1992)	HU3	22	40.437	62.457	9.491
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
8	KGSt (1991)	HU4	17	33.880	60.000	8.029
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
16	KGSt (1994a)	HU5	13	41.530	63.103	11.786
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
18	Banner (1994)	HU6	12	22.951	56.308	4.806
19	KGSt (1993b)	HU7	12	25.683	57.009	6.519
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮
22	KGSt (1994b)	HU8	11	19.126	54.627	4.104
⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮	⋮

Note. <sup>a</sup> See reference list for bibliographic details. <sup>b</sup> Normalized.

However, the frequency with which a publication is cited is not the only indication of the importance of a publication. Additionally, its centrality in the citation network must be taken into account. To do this, we employed the bibliometric technique of co-citation analysis (for a recent application in management studies see Acedo, Barroso and Galan, 2006; for initial publications see Garfield, Malin and Small, 1978; Griffith, Small, Stonehill and Dey, 1974; Small, 1973; Small and Griffith, 1974). A co-citation, by definition, occurs when two documents are cited jointly in the same publication. The method is based upon the assumption that any such co-citation is an author's judgement on the similarity of documents. Under this premise, the more often two texts are cited jointly, the greater their similarity. On an aggregated level, the method is employed to detect closely related documents that can be considered as homogenous subfields in the discourse under investigation. Therefore, the co-citation technique is a method of explorative pattern recognition which draws on large-scale statistical analysis rather than on qualitative peer judgements. The collected co-citation data can be processed using network analysis which allows for supplementing the simple citation counts for each publication with some descriptive measures

of its network centrality (Table 1).<sup>3</sup> The results can also be visualized in a network diagram (Figure 1).<sup>4</sup> Next, we conduct a content analysis on the selected publications with respect to the frame for which they serve as vehicles.

Figure 1: Selected Publications in Co-Citation Network



### Results: The Framing Strategy of KGSt

We conducted an interpretive textual analysis of the publications which we selected in the previous section for their impact on the NPM discourse. The aim of this analysis was to elucidate the framing strategy pursued by KGSt to establish NSM in the German administrative system at the local level. We used the software package Atlas.ti to analyze the selected publications as hermeneutic units (HU; for an index see Table 1). In this section we elaborate on the three stages of a framing strategy introduced in Section Two: breaking the old frame, constructing a new frame and adjusting this new frame (Abolafia, 2004). To figure out how framing strategies work in this case setting, we substantiate our interpretations with quotations from the selected publications.

### Breaking the Old Frame – ‘Organized Irresponsibility’

At the 1990 general meeting of KGSt, the director at that time, Gerhard Banner, started the framing process in his inaugural address which was targeted at an audience of decision-makers from member agencies. According to the KGSt’s own information, its triennial members’ meeting is the largest congress on public management in Europe. Hence, in its initial phase, the framing process was based on *oral communication* between the figurehead of KGSt and top and middle managers from local authorities. However, after the congress, the speech manuscript was released in a practitioner-oriented journal and became one of the most influential publications in the German discourse on NPM (Banner, 1991; see Table 1). In this publication, the frame breaking phase started with the identification of what the old frame is. The old frame, challenged by Banner, is the classic model of bureaucracy based on centrality, input control, procedure-orientation and legality. Although Banner does not explicitly refer to the work, the old frame corresponds to Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy (Weber, 1968), the blueprint of the administrative system in Germany. Banner argues that this ideal is dysfunctional in several ways. Before Banner lists the reasons why classic bureaucracy is out of date in a more analytical fashion, Banner exemplifies the common behaviour of a budget-maximizing bureaucrat in an anecdote:

What does a chief officer do if additional or new services are to be performed in his agency, caused by shifts of the market? He calls for more personnel, more money, more bureaus. What does he not do? He does not (exceptions are seldom) try to meet the new requirements by re-allocation of resources in his own agency. [...] Why does he not initially examine the option of re-allocation? The answer is: First, because nobody demands from him to do so – the responsibility for resources does not rest with him, but with central agencies – and second, if he nevertheless did, he would have to overcome too many resistances (HU2: 6-7).<sup>5</sup>

In this stylistic question-and-answer style, Banner recalls the personal experiences of the audience and draws attention to the disincentives of the orthodox bureaucratic system. He concludes that the system punishes cost-effective behaviour, whereas the waste of public funds is rewarded. This scathing criticism culminates in the notions of ‘bureaucratic centralism’ and ‘system of organized irresponsibility’ by means of which the old frame is blamed with catchy labels. Although this system has endured for a long time, certain dynamics have led to a misfit between the administration and its environment. At this stage of the framing process, the old frame is causally connected with an almost existential crisis of local self-government:

Recently, changes in the environments of municipal governments as well as changes of values have turned the control principle of bureaucratic centralism into a functional and even existential threat of local self-government (HU2: 7).

Taking this line of reasoning, the causes of the proclaimed crisis are located in the control system of local governments. In contrast to this overly monocausal diagnosis, KGSt points out the multi-faceted symptoms of the crisis by listing four ‘gaps’ between reality and requirements, all related to control deficits in the bureaucratic system. The *strategy gap* refers to the planning horizon of local authorities which is aligned with short-term political cycles rather than long-term priorities. This lack of strategic planning is aggravated by budgetary problems which limit the scope of long-range strategies. The *management gap* is twofold: Firstly, the management of fully or partly

owned public enterprises is dramatically underdeveloped in comparison with the private sector. Secondly, the management gap consists of the division of responsibilities in local agencies, resulting in economic disincentives:

Namely, responsibility for tasks and resources is divided. The resources are allocated by central instances [...], the re-allocation of personnel, positions and money within the department usually depends on the permission of these instances. This *division of responsibility* virtually invites the departments to make excessive applications for funds and to disregard of cost criteria (HU1: 10).

The *attractiveness gap* refers to emerging problems of recruitment. To an increasing extent, the public service fails to meet the demands of applicants who look for responsible, diverse and creative jobs. Finally, with the *legitimacy gap*, the issue of the relationship between administration and citizen is addressed. Citizens are more and more unwilling to tolerate non-transparency and inflexibility of administrative decision-making and they expect continuous improvements in the quality of service delivery.

In its early stage, the framing strategy of KGSt aims at spreading the awareness of crisis in the public sector. This crisis is proclaimed to be existential. It is dramatized in figurative terms and labelled with striking buzzwords. The aforementioned gaps catch the various appearances of the crisis and underline the need for action. The way the crisis is diagnosed by KGSt shows that framing is in keeping with the principle of 'hiding and highlighting': Whereas the disadvantages of the bureaucratic system are broadly stressed, its advantages are marginalized. The performance of the German administrative system in terms of its stability, reliability and legality is only casually acknowledged (HU2: 7; HU1: 13). The problem description offered by KGSt strongly relies on the definition in which respect the problems occur and is, therefore, highly selective. As a result, changes in the public sector seem to be inevitable. However, KGSt is keen to emphasize that the problems the administrative system is facing cannot be resolved within the old frame. Since the nature of the crisis is unlike any that has gone before, it cannot be tackled by means of conventional solutions which remain in accordance with the principles of classic bureaucracy. Instead of incremental changes within the old frame, a strategic renewal is necessary:

The local government cannot meet the new demands as long as it adheres to the self-image and design principles of a primarily legalistic administration. It requires a modernization on the basis of a new vision (HU1: 13).

The replacement of the old frame by a new one is inevitable. But before developing a new frame, KGSt puts forward an *alternative frame* that does *not* offer an appropriate solution for the problems of the public sector. This alternative frame is *privatization*. In the initial publications of KGSt, privatization of public agencies is introduced as a prevalent, though dangerous panacea for the problems of the public sector (HU2: 7-8; HU6: 8-10; HU4: 10-11; HU1: 11). The weaknesses of the bureaucratic system intensify the urge to abandon it and instead to choose private legal forms for previously public tasks. However, the control problems are not mitigated but rather aggravated by mass privatization:

Fact is that political councils and administrative boards, if they refrained from exerting direct influence on an agency and believed that it can be delegated to supervisory boards and committees, would renounce their rights (and duties) to govern municipalities in a holistic political framework. If this misunderstanding is

dramatized to an allegedly universal, organizational remedy, then the sell-out of local self-government is inevitable, and it becomes easily possible that it is replaced by the principle of self-service (HU2: 8).

The danger of an already ongoing ‘erosion of local self-government’ (HU1: 11) once again underpins the need for action. The price of inactivity would be a further loss of control caused by privatization of public agencies. Because neither classic bureaucracy nor privatization offers promising solutions, a new frame must be developed and implemented.

To conclude, the framing strategy of KGSt starts with breaking the old frame. At this stage, the framing process relies heavily on a figurehead who recognizes the strategic opportunity of reframing and leverages resources and skills in order to call the established practices of administration into question. This function of a ‘reframer’ (Abolafia, 2004) or ‘institutional entrepreneur’ (Fligstein, 1997) is performed by the director of KGSt. The framing is retrospective, describing the various facets of a crisis which has culminated under prevalence of the old frame (strategy gap, management gap, attractiveness gap, legitimacy gap). It initially aims at raising awareness of the existence of a crisis and of the need for far-reaching measures. In the first instance, exposure of the problem causes uncertainty because it suggests that the crisis, due to its magnitude, is profound and extraordinary. A need for clarification of what causes the problems is induced. KGSt meets this demand by offering a seemingly convincing interpretation in which it is alleged that the problems arise from dysfunctions of the bureaucratic control system. This system is blamed using catchy buzzwords by which the old frame receives labels (‘bureaucratic centralism’, ‘organized irresponsibility’). At this point it becomes clear that framing strategies are, to a great extent, rhetorical strategies. These rhetorical manoeuvres also include attempts to persuade the audience that the existing frames are no fit to tackle the challenges. Both bureaucracy and privatization make things even worse. As a consequence, it appears irresponsible to support one of these options. Rather, a new narrative for changes in the public sector is required. By constructing the new frame, the framing strategy enters its prospective phase.

### Constructing the New Frame – ‘New Steering Model’

The second stage of the framing strategy moves the attention away from the past to the future, adding prescriptive elements to the frame. While in the frame breaking situation the impression is created that *something* has to be done, now it is said *what* will be done. The proposed remedy for the structural crisis of the public sector is the *New Steering Model* (NSM). NSM has turned into a predominate label for NPM in Germany (Reichard, 2003; Wollmann, 2000). Once again, a catchy label is integrated into the narrative. The ingredient ‘model’ refers to the preconditions which have to be satisfied before public agencies can turn into enterprise-like service providers. By its own account, KGSt does not pursue an one-size-fits-all approach but aims precisely at merging the essentials of the new vision that allow for high degrees of freedom in order to adjust the concept to local conditions (HU1: 15). In this visionary phase, the ‘realizability’ is not yet the central issue (HU2: 8).

With the shift from retrospective to prospective, the second stage likewise shifts, from an individual to a group level. The framing strategy is no longer accelerated by an individual alone

but is borne by working groups organized by KGSt. In these projects, the various reports are generated in which NSM is stepwise developed. The project teams consist of staff from KGSt, representatives of other think tanks, scientists and practitioners from domestic as well as from foreign local governments. KGSt explicitly draws on foreign experiences:

Other than at the beginning of the 1980s, foreign as well as few domestic experiences how local authorities have successfully faced incisive changes of their environments and preserved their autonomy are available. It is imperative to exploit these experiences (HU1: 8).

KGSt states that there is remarkable convergence in the international debate on NPM and that Germany cannot evade these developments (HU2: 11; HU6; HU3: 11; HU1: 23-4). In face of the international NPM movement, there is little alternative to decentralization, participation, market and service orientation, output measurement and control (HU3: 11). However, these approaches are not abstract principles without reference to reality. Rather, they are already implemented in a growing number of countries. In its search for best practices, KGSt looks especially to the Netherlands because of the comparability with the German administrative system, the similarity of management and control problems and the progressiveness of the modernization process (HU2: 10-11; HU3: 13). In an extensive report, the reform process of the Dutch town of Tilburg is presented, creating a template for the modernization of local governments in Germany:

It [the report] sketches the dimensions of an all-embracing reform of the political-administrative system of a municipality against the background of internationally discussed approaches of modernization of local governments. The reform described here ranges from a changed overall concept of local government, a different relationship between political and administrative councils, the multidivisional structure of administration, economic management and control systems to necessary changes of administrative culture (HU2: 9).

The core elements of NSM are derived from the template of Tilburg. According to the main report (HU1), three rationales, though closely intertwined, can be distinguished: *Firstly*, the proposed organizational structure of public agencies is heavily decentralized. Responsibilities of tasks and resources are jointly assigned to peripheral departments which receive periodical budgets. Their managerial freedom of action increases considerably. At the same time, the departments are accountable to central agencies which control their results. These agencies, resembling corporate headquarters, perform tasks of strategic management which cannot be delegated. At the same time, they act as contract partners of political councils, whose sphere of influence is focused on middle- and long-range goals while staying out of the daily business of administration. In this respect, NSM incorporates elements of management by objectives, now labelled as 'contract management.' *Secondly*, NSM relies on output control. The increasing autonomy of the departments gives rise to new demands on the control system, which shifts from input to output control. To make the output-based control system run, the service products of an agency must be defined, measured against and compared with previously specified goals. Accordingly, the management control requires informational support from the controlling and reporting system which undergoes a professionalization, interfering with changes in accounting. And *thirdly*, competition is fostered in order to improve the performance of public agencies. Due to the absence of market pressures in the public sector, this competition is simulated in benchmarking both among public agencies and private firms.

At this stage of the framing strategy, KGSt not only answers the question of why it is *inevitable* to adopt this model – because external pressures of the international NPM movement force public agencies to do so – but also why it is *desirable*. By presenting the template of Tilburg as example of a ‘good’ (i.e. progressive, modern) local government, stressed in overly positive terms, the attractiveness of NSM is emphasized (HU3). Furthermore, KGSt creates a positive image of what public agencies look like if they adopt NSM. For this purpose, it uses the expressive power of *metaphor communication*. Metaphor communication enables the externalisation of tacit knowledge and thus the diffusion of that knowledge across organizational domains (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). In all analysed publications, a metaphorical comparison of the new administration with a service enterprise (*Dienstleistungsunternehmen*) is made, more or less frequently. In some of the publications, this metaphor is even contained in the headline (HU2; HU3). Metaphors always describe good fits and misfits between the subjects referenced to each other. Therefore, it deserves clarification as to which respects the metaphorical connected subjects (source and target) are comparable. According to KGSt, comparability of the new administration with a service enterprise is given with regard to its orientation toward customers, demand, competition and employees (HU1: 13-4). However, KGSt is also aware of the limits of the metaphor:

At this point a clarification is in order. A local government with the self-image of a service enterprise and an according organization does not turn into a private firm. ... Therefore, a blind imitation of structures and instruments of the private sector is out of place. Incidentally, the private sector is by no means always exemplary. In the economy, there are mismanagement, missed chances and problems of bureaucracy as well. Nevertheless, a municipality which considers its public tasks can strongly benefit from a look on the private sector (HU1: 14).

The function of the employed metaphor in the framing process is to steer the changes towards a desirable vision. In its reductive character, it helps to avoid that the communication is overloaded with technical details about NSM. Instead, by frequently applying the metaphor, KGSt ensures the omnipresence of a common objective of public sector modernization which is expressed in a simple message. The underlying principle can best be illustrated with a quotation of Antoine de Saint-Exupery: ‘If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea.’

With the metaphor of a service enterprise, another feature of the frame construction can be demonstrated. At this stage of the framing process, prescriptive and descriptive elements are thoroughly confused. Although clearly a normative guideline, the notion of service enterprise is also used in descriptions of a current transformation process (HU4: 10). After all, even the direction of action between NSM and the shift of public agencies into service enterprises remains unclear. On the one hand, the changeover to NSM derives from this shift which seems to occur independently:

The progressive evolution of local governments to service enterprises suggested to substitute the bureaucratic model by an enterprise-like, decentralized control model ... (HU6: 5).

On the other hand, it is NSM which enables local governments to turn into service enterprises:

The New Steering Model is the precondition which has to be fulfilled in order to make the service enterprise local government run (HU1: 15).

This quotation sheds new light on NSM: It no longer necessarily provokes a new development but only supports an already ongoing one or even itself results from it. Therefore, NSM appears as an inescapable intervention in a transformation which is underway but has not been made explicit so far. Although it sharply departs from classic bureaucracy, the type of change NSM induces is presented as being more evolutionary than revolutionary. In this respect, the narrative is partially inconsistent.

To conclude, in the construction of the new frame, KGSt changes from being a critic of the old frame to being an advocate of a new one. Framing does not stop at rejecting the old frame but goes further by suggesting an alternative. Though, frames simultaneously define problems, identify their causes and propose solutions. The solution of the crisis of the public sector is NSM which, seemingly inevitable, evolves from the international NPM movement. Opponent frames (bureaucracy and privatization) are discriminated in favour of NSM which is exhibited as superior to any alternative. At the very general level on which the elements of NSM are presented, it aims at building the largest possible consensus of the audience and at forming a broad coalition of supporters. By drawing on the experiences of a foreign municipality, a best practice transfer is encouraged. The metaphor of service enterprise offers a positive imagination of the future which is aligned with the means of achieving it. The use of a metaphor, once again, highlights the rhetorical essence of framing. It simplifies the communication of the new frame because it captures it in a positively connoted phrase and helps to avoid that the technical elements of NSM prevail over the overall vision. However, ultimately, the frame gets more 'operationalized'.

#### Adjusting the Frame – 'Are Things Going Well?'

In the last stage of the framing strategy, turning possibility into reality is what lies at the heart of KGSt's activities. To complete the framing strategy, it is not sufficient only to spread a new vision; it has to be implemented in practice. Whereas in this stadium it is both clear *that* something must be done and *what* is to be done, it is not yet clear *how* it has to be done. Although in the frame construction the realization of NSM is not paramount, there are some arrangements which strengthen the perceived practicability of the model from the very beginning of its construction. *Firstly*, the 'realizability' of NSM can hardly be questioned since it is, at least in part, yet realized – in Tilburg, NL. *Secondly*, it heavily interferes with a practical development, namely the shift of public agencies into service enterprises, though it is unclear how it interferes with it. And *thirdly*, the basic reports on NSM (HU4; HU3; HU1) are all generated by task forces which consist, to a great part, of practitioners, although they only work out a concept which has previously been projected by KGSt.

In spite of this inherent practicability, the issue of implementation of NSM is explicitly broached by KGSt in the adjustment of the frame. All of the initial publications on NSM contain concrete

advice for the implementation process (HU2: 10; HU4: 42-5; HU3: 143-9; HU1: 25-37). According to the main report, it is especial to convince opinion leaders both in politics and administration:

However, at the implementation phase, no progress is made simply by the general conclusion that it [NSM] fits into its time. What is necessary for this purpose is a local-tailored process of convincing which aims at achieving the critical mass for the reorientation of administration by concentration of interests of important actors. Therefore, the actors must be made aware that this reorientation serves their self-interest. Also, the indication of already working partial solutions is always convincing (HU1: 25).

Beside this persuasion tactic, several other success factors for the application of NSM are described in publications of KGSt (*e.g.* HU1: 25-37). Among them is the stepwise implementation of NSM, starting with pilot projects in subunits and successively including other fields of application. The restructuring should be handled by a professional project management team which clearly defines objectives, milestones, responsibilities and resources. Particular emphasis is put on the personnel. To ensure the acceptance of NSM, employees ought to participate in the change process. Furthermore, the people should be prepared for their new roles and tasks in trainings. The psychological effects of the restructuring are to be taken into consideration.

In spite of these and other advice for the application of the new frame, it still lacks applicability because it is not yet fully developed. To ask for the compliance of the audience, KGSt initially develops NSM on a very general level, favouring a visionary rhetoric instead of elaborating technical details. This profoundly changes when it comes to the adjustment of the frame. Now the frame is equipped with further information on its implications for practice, *i.e.* with how-to knowledge. In order to provide this information, KGSt releases a series of reports in which the elements of NSM, previously sketched only roughly, are further developed. By its own account, twenty official publications which are directly related to NSM are edited in the focal period (KGSt, 2007: 16). Most of the reports we selected for our framing analysis deal with aspects of output control as basic idea of NSM. This holds true for the definition of service products as units for output measurement (HU5) and controlling (HU8). These reports are supplemented by a survey on budgeting (HU7). However, the shift to the conceptual elements of NSM does not mean that the new frame is taken for granted. Rather, the legitimization of the frame is an ongoing task throughout the whole framing process. Therefore, most subsequent reports contain explanatory statements on NSM, repeating its motives, objectives and rationales, that is, in short, *the message*.

The need for legitimization arises from the criticism that the new frame is subjected to throughout the whole process. If there were no opposition to NSM, it could be asked whether there was a need for framing at all. Hence, KGSt constantly engages in responding to the critics of NSM. The criticism intensifies with the adjustment of the frame because only now does it become clear what tangible consequences it has for employees in the public service. In his address to the general meeting of 1993, the director of KGSt deals with the resistances to change NSM is faced with in practice. Although he is comfortable with the magnitude of modernization efforts in the public sector since his first initiative, he encourages reflections on the reform process:

After such a rapid start we have reason to pause for a moment to make sure if things are doing well or if re-accentuations or corrections are to be made (HU6: 6).

For Banner, the structural aspects of NSM are overemphasized in many projects, whereas the cultural dimension is underestimated. He concludes from this imbalance that focus should be directed more on the employees and on changing their attitudes and behaviour. However, only the way NSM is implemented is criticized, not the concept itself. NSM is still presented as resulting from a 'sociopolitical postulate' and even 'all-powerful forces' (HU6: 6). Banner identifies a special group of employed persons who offer resistance with their understanding of change:

Juristically thinking government employees – there are a great many of them – look at organizational changes as a linear process which has to be initiated at the top: At first, a law is needed, then an executive order, then an internal administrative rule, and only after that the administration can engage in the realization. Previously, nothing will happen. [...] Obviously, administrative modernization is no linear but a circular, iterative process. One can and must start at various points. What the right starting points are depends on the local situation. Who states that B is not possible before A, is, in case of doubt, not willing to change anything. However, we do not have the excuse to do nothing (HU6: 12).

To conclude, in the adjustment of the frame, the framing strategy enters its practical phase. Whereas the framing is directed at the past in frame breaking and at the future in frame construction, in frame adjustment the emphasis is on the presence. What is to be done to execute the new frame now? To answer this question, the frame deserves further elaboration. Especially its rationale – output control – is projected in greater detail to cope with the context of application. The main focus of the think tank lies on fine-tuning the frame. This inevitably provokes criticism because the immediate consequences for practice are successively revealed. The think tank both prevents these criticisms and protects against them: While it makes several recommendations for a smooth implementation process, it also eliminates objections by deflecting negative input back to its originators, in other words, by criticizing the critics. Although the frame is now debated less visionary and more technical, the legitimizing efforts of the think tank last for the whole framing process to stabilize the interpretations of the new frame.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

In our case study, the KGSt think tank offers a separate organizational setting within an organizational field of local governments for the development of new ideas and concepts; these ideas and concepts alter traditional ways of organizing public tasks. The scope of the explorative endeavours of KGSt comprises both methods and instruments of the private sector and foreign best practices in the public sector, resulting in the *New Steering Model* (NSM). This shows that think tanks partly employ as 'recycling bins' (Stone, 2007). With regard to the elements of NSM, some of them are only new to the German public sector. For example, contract management is clearly based on 'management by objectives' which has a long-standing tradition in private sector management. This also holds true for controlling and benchmarking. Thus, the novelty of some conceptual elements of NSM is relative to the point of reference. The explorative merit of the think tank KGSt is, on the one hand, to detect these concepts and ideas, to evaluate their adequacy for resolving the dysfunctions of the bureaucratic control system in the German public

sector, and to contextualize them in the specific field of application. On the other hand, and maybe to a greater proportion, the exploration consists in the integration of these partial solutions in a superstructure, namely NSM. For the local governments, this newly explored concept becomes an alternative to the exploitation of already available solutions like bureaucracy or privatization.

Although the assignment of exploration to a think tank has the advantage of allowing for a remote search for new ideas and visions, it may turn into a disadvantage as through this the spheres of generation and application of knowledge are institutionally divided. Therefore, to make new ideas and concepts work, it must develop strategies of facing structural inertia and resistance to change. In our case study, we have examined one such strategy: the framing strategy. The think tank KGSt disseminates NSM in a framing process oriented toward its member agencies in a bid to motivate them to adopt the new practice. This process of framing includes three stages: frame breaking, frame construction and frame adjustment. Although these phases are not clear-cut, our case study reveals some distinguishing features with respect to the objective, key question, temporal orientation and rhetoric of each stage. We summarize these characteristics in Table 2. The results support insights on how framing works which previous research offers, e.g. on policy meetings (Abolafia, 2004), social movement participation (Benford and Snow, 2000; Maguire, 2002; Snow, Rochford Jr., Worden and Benford, 1986) and political institution-building (Kohler-Koch, 2000).

Table 2: Characteristics of the Framing Stages

	<b>Frame breaking</b>	<b>Frame construction</b>	<b>Frame adjustment</b>
Objective	Spreading the awareness of crisis, blaming bureaucracy	Describing the desirable end of the reform, developing NCM	Implementing NCM, equipping it with how-to-knowledge, defending it against criticism
Key Question	Why must something be done?	What must be done?	How must it be done?
Temporal Orientation	Past	Future	Present
Rhetoric	Dramatic	Visionary/metaphorical	Technical

So far, our study demonstrates that the focal think tank has chosen the option of framing and how it has arranged the framing process. What is still missing, however, is information on how successful KGSt has been in doing so. Although our citation analysis shows that KGSt has had a remarkable impact on the discussion of NPM in Germany, the *implementation* of NSM in administrative practice is an analytical level distinct from the *discourse* on it. To what extent has NSM actually been applied in local governments? According to a 2004 survey of the *German Institute of Urban Affairs* out of 243 municipalities, 77.2 per cent of the respondents state that the modernization process in their administration has at least partially been guided by NSM (Knipp, 2005). Similarly, in a comparable survey among 1,565 local governments in 2005, 81.2 per cent of the responding organizations state that they have adopted either partial solutions or the overall concept of NSM (Bogumil, Grohs, Kuhlmann and Ohm, 2007). Thus, in the face of the

remarkable high diffusion rate of NSM in administrative practice, the framing strategy pursued by KGSt can be assumed to have been very successful.

Organizing for innovation is a crucial task in the low- or non-competitive environment in public sectors. The assignment of the innovation function to think tanks which serve as central sources for new knowledge is an arrangement which helps to avoid competency traps in public agencies. Of course, the organizational design of such a think tank needs further elaboration. In our case study, we have highlighted framing as one of their core capabilities.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Related concepts are agenda setting and priming (Entman, 2007; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007; Weaver, 2007). Put simply, agenda setting and priming refer to the question *whether* we think about an issue, whereas framing addresses *how* we think about it (Scheufele et al., 2007: 14). Agenda setting is based on the idea that the emphasis media place on a certain topic is correlated with the importance which is attributed to it by the audience. Priming refers to the manipulation of evaluation criteria, setting benchmarks for the assessment of the performance of leaders and governments. Framing, agenda setting and priming are not clear-cut concepts but fit together, in part overlapping, as complementary steps in interpretive politics. In this view, agenda setting and priming can be understood as pre- or early stages of framing (Entman, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> See <http://www.kgst.de/>.
- <sup>3</sup> As supposed, there is a high but by no means perfect rank correlation between the citation count and the centrality measures. Among the publications which received 5 citations or more, all correlation coefficients (Kendall-Tau-b and Spearman-Rho) are significant at the level of at least  $p < 0.05$ .
- <sup>4</sup> Every node represents a cited publication and every tie a co-citation relationship. The node size is proportional to the number of citations, whereas the tie strength reflects the number of co-citations. We only marked and labeled publications which could be assigned to KGSt.
- <sup>5</sup> All translations are done by the authors.

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