

The Risks of Hybrid Organisations: Expectations and Evidence

Taco Brandsen (Radboud University Nijmegen)

Philip Karré (Netherlands School of Public Administration)

Jan-Kees Helderman (Radboud University Nijmegen)

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Contact information:

Dr. Taco Brandsen
Nijmegen School of Management
Radboud University Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9108
NL - 6500 HK Nijmegen
t.brandsen@fm.ru.nl

Mag. phil. Philip Marcel Karré
Netherlands School for Public Administration
Lange Voorhout 17
NL – 2514 EB The Hague
karre@hybrideorganisaties.nl

Dr. Jan-Kees Helderman
Nijmegen School of Management
Radboud University Nijmegen
P.O. Box 9108
NL - 6500 HK Nijmegen
j.helderman@fm.ru.nl

1. Introduction

Hybrid organisations straddle the edge of state, market and civil society, usually carrying out public duties with state funding, but with some form of private ownership and control. As such, they tend to attract criticism that they misuse public money for private ends, that they give rise to conflicts of interest and that they are generally out of control. There are indeed many examples of the risks of hybrids, with various cases of corruption and risky ventures at the public's expense. This was recently epitomised by the spectacular collapse of two of the most famous of such organisations in the US, the mortgage lenders Freddy Mac and Fanny Mae.

Roughly, the emergence of hybrids over the past century has come about through two paths. The first, most commonly found in Western welfare states, is where private organisations have become involved in delivering public services, mostly as part of corporatist systems. Following public management reforms, such organisations have increasingly started working within competitive, contractual arrangements. The second path is one where state organisations have been privatised with the state retaining a major stake through full or partial ownership, turning them into state-owned enterprises, or through other means remains closely involved. This is most relevant to countries that have gone through a post-communist transition phase, as in Central and Eastern Europe. However, on a lesser scale similar developments have occurred elsewhere, inspired by New Public Management ideas.

As a result, the public and the private sector now overlap and interact in a number of ways (Rainey, 1997: 58-60). Governments have shifted their focus from *providing* public services themselves to *ensuring* that others (whether or not they are public organisations at arms' length or private enterprises) do so. On the other side of the eroding divide between public and private, entrepreneurs are closely monitoring the developments concerning public services, calculating whether it will be economically viable to become active in the public sector as well (Karré et.al., 2007; 2008). As a result, a whole new range of mixed, intermediate and hybrid forms have developed.

Should such organisational mixes of public and private interests then be avoided altogether? We argue that this is not necessarily the case. While there is ample

anecdotal evidence of the failure of this type of organisation, there have been few systematic studies of hybrid organisations and their failures or successes. Furthermore, warnings against mixing public and private interests are to some extent a-historical. Many Western European economies and welfare states have traditionally evolved through intimate connections between the state and private interest organisations. There are long periods in which such systems have proved stable and successful, even though they depended to a great extent on organisations with a fuzzy position between market, state and civil society.

The question is therefore under what conditions hybrid organisations fail or succeed. We will show, on the basis of a comprehensive research programme in The Netherlands, that some of the supposed risks do not necessarily materialise and opportunities may be salvaged, given that proper regulatory safeguards are installed. This is of course also a relevant issue in post-communist countries, where questions over the role of the state in relation to private enterprises are both topical and under researched.

Paragraph two will start our analysis by discussing different conceptualisations of hybrid organisations. In paragraph three, we describe the risks and opportunities theoretically associated with them. Paragraph four describes the empirical evidence from our research programme. The paper ends with a discussion on the regulatory conditions which must be established to allow hybrid organisations to function well.

2. The meaning of hybridity

2.1 Conceptualisations

So what are hybrid organisations exactly? This is not straightforward and various definitions exist. Generally, hybridity can be defined as the combination of contradictory characteristics within one single unity. An example from biology would be the mule, the (in this case infertile) offspring of a male donkey and a female horse. Another example is the hybrid car, which combines two or more distinct power sources. In organisational theory hybrid organisations would be bodies that operate in more than one sector of society and hence combine different activities and revenue

streams, different values and cultures and different modes of governance. This combination can create opportunities due to synergetic effects, but can also lead to risks when tensions arise due to the combination of conflicting characteristics within one organisation.

In business administration, the term specifically refers to a combination of functional and business unit organisation. Here we will focus on the meanings prevalent in public administration research, in which two traditions can be discerned. The first conceptualises hybrids as organisations simultaneously operating in the public and the private sectors (i.e. within a dichotomy), while the other defines them in terms of a threefold distinction between state, market and civil society.

2.2 Hybridity as a combination of the public and the private

The distinction between “public” and “private” is, according to the Italian philosopher Bobbio (1989: 1-2), one of the “grand dichotomies” of Western political thought. This “binary opposition” (Weintraub, 1997: 1) divides our world into two exhaustive and mutually exclusive spheres, subsumes all other distinctions and makes them secondary. In this article we will define the dichotomy between public and private as the distinction between agencies (organisations operating in the field of state administration) and enterprises (organisations operating in the domain of the market economy). Definitions of public organisations are mostly based on the allegedly different characteristics compared to those of their private counterparts. The most important distinguishing characteristics of agencies and enterprises are:

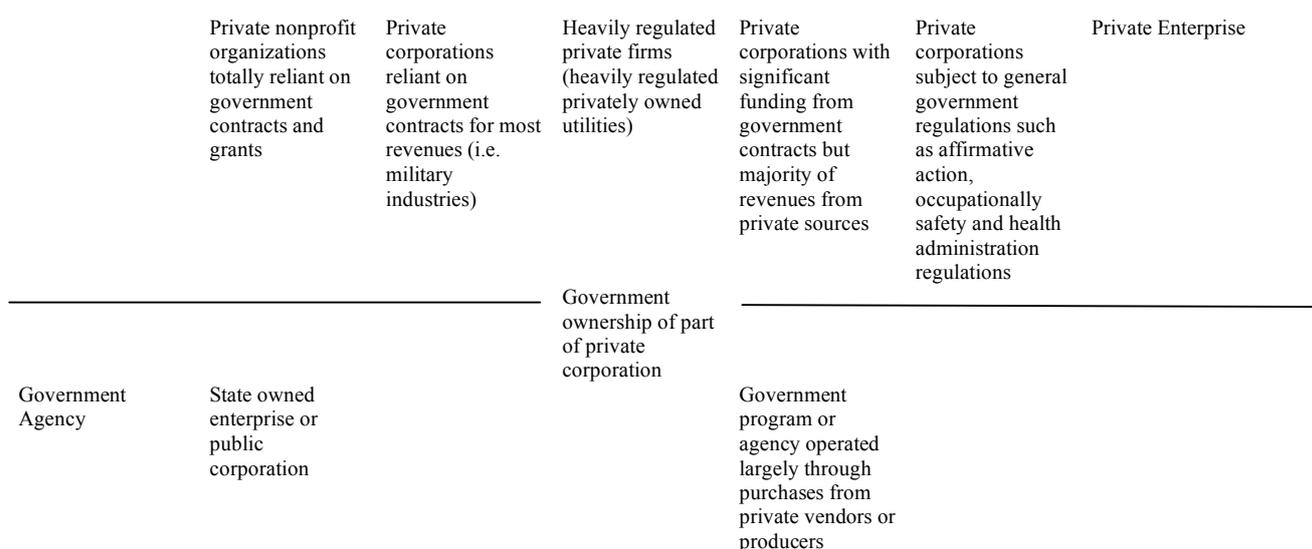
Figure 1: Characteristics of agencies and enterprises (adapted from In ‘t Veld & Twist, 1999: 7; Lane, 1994, Jacobs, 1994):

<i>Government agency</i>	<i>Commercial enterprise</i>
Strategy and organisation on the basis of political objectives	Strategy and organisation on the basis of market opportunities
Management primarily directed at political principal	Management primarily directed at consumers
Aiming for optimal co-operation with political principal	Aiming for maximal freedom / independence with regard to other organisations
Disclosure of costs and profits to political principal	No disclosure of costs and profits, but built in financial security to counterbalance risks
Political principal responsible for continuity	Management responsible for continuity
Core values: rules, formalism, legality and the public interest	Core values: objectives, innovation, effectiveness and profit

In practice, it is generally difficult to maintain such clear-cut distinctions between organisations. In order to describe and analyse the various hybrid forms which are neither completely “public” nor completely “private”, researchers have devised new ways of looking at our world. Dahl and Lindblom (Rainey, 1997: 64) have developed a complex continuum (see figure 1) of types of organisations ranging from enterprises (organisations primarily controlled by markets) to agencies (public or government-owned organisations).

Figure 3: Agencies, enterprises, and hybrid organisations (Rainey, 1997: 65)

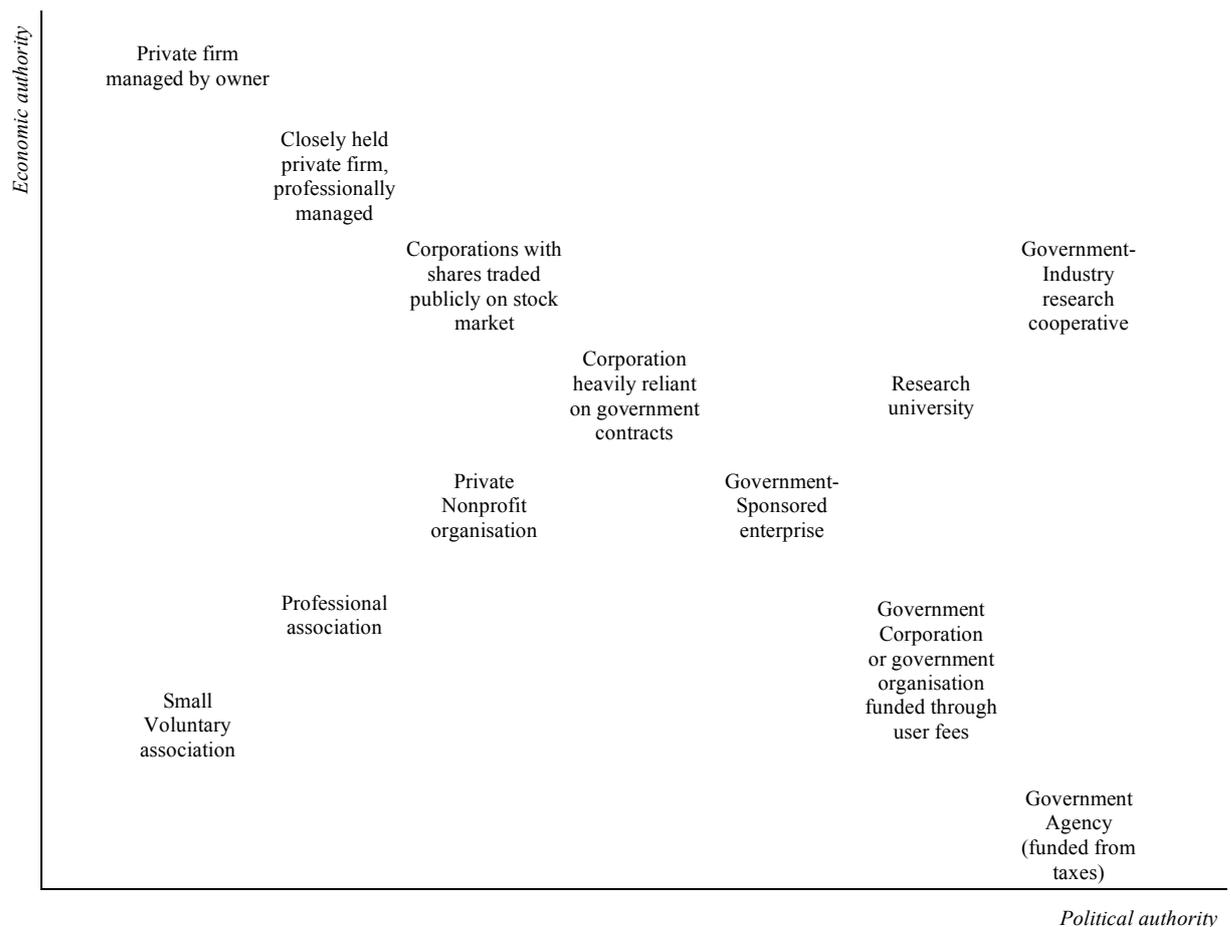
The extreme poles in this continuum are the private enterprise (top right) and the government agency (bottom left). The top row depicts organizational forms usually referred to as private enterprise or free enterprise and the row below arrangements colloquially referred to as public, government-owned, or nationalized. In the middle are arrangements popularly considered neither public nor private.



Several authors have developed multi-dimensional approaches as means to position organisations on Dahl & Lindblom’s continuum between public enterprise and government agency. The one devised by Wamsley and Zald (1973, described in Rainey & Chun, 2005: 76-77) using the two dimensions of ownership and funding is perhaps the most basic. They argue that organisations can either be owned by government or privately-owned. They either receive their funding from public sources, such as budget allocations from legislative bodies, or from private sources, such as donations or sales on the market. Combining these two dichotomies results in four categories of organisations, including two hybrid forms when public funding and private ownership are mixed and vice versa.

A more refined model of conceptualising hybrid organisations is Bozeman’s notion of “publicness” (Bozeman, 1987). He argues that all organisations have some degree of political influence and are subject to some level of external government control. Bozeman uses two subdimensions, i.e. political and economic authority to determine an organisation’s “publicness” (Bozeman, 1987: ch. 4 and 5) Economic authority refers to the control owners and managers have over an organisation’s revenues and assets. It decreases as external government authorities gain more control over their finances. Political authority is granted to organisations by other political actors, like the citizenry or governmental institutions and enables them to act on their behalf and to make binding decisions for them. Private organisations have very little political authority as they operate on their own behalf, whereas government agencies act for the community and hence have high levels of it (Rainey, 1997: 66-69).

Figure 4: Publicness Grid (Rainey, 1997: 68, based on Bozeman, 1987: 95)



Bozeman positions organisations in a “publicness grid” (figure 3) based on the influence political and economic authority have on their actions. The owner-managed private firm occupies one extreme (high on economic authority, low on political

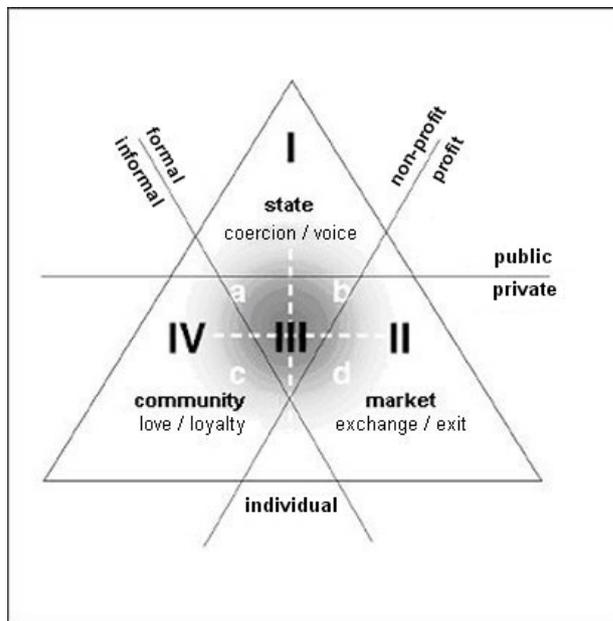
authority) and the traditional government bureau (low on economic authority, high on political authority) the other. An array of other organisational forms represents combinations of the two dimensions.

2.3 Hybrid organisations at the cross-section of three domains

The dichotomy between state and market has in a number of recent studies been replaced by a trichotomy, developed under the influence of the work of Pestoff (1992), subsequently adopted and revised by researchers then based at Tilburg University (Van de Donk, 2001; Brandsen et.al., 2005). This tradition added a third domain of ‘community’ (elsewhere also referred to as ‘civil society’), with hybrids occupying the centre ground¹. In addition to public versus private, the dimensions of formal versus informal and profit versus non-profit were added to the equation. This had the benefit of extending the discussion beyond public administration research (see e.g. Evers & Laville, 2004) and to make it more sensitive to different organisational characteristics and histories. It also extended the disciplinary range of the debate, making more room for contributions from sociology and political science.

¹ Somewhat confusingly, the “third sector”, the domain of non-profits is seen as being part of the centre ground and not part of the community domain.

Figure 5: Three domains (Pestoff, 1992; Van de Donk, 2001; Brandsen, et.al., 2005)



Within these domains, the coordination mechanisms of competition, hierarchy and network are at play. In other theoretical traditions, on which we will not dwell here, it is even customary to define hybridity exclusively in terms of such mechanisms (e.g. Kenis, 2006). What has contributed to misunderstandings is that different interpretations are sometimes combined too easily, for example, when it is assumed that public organisations operate in the state domain and are therefore controlled through hierarchy –with no clearly defined level of analysis. This is of course nonsense. Competition may be the dominant coordination mechanism in the market domain, but its existence cannot be assumed unconditionally, nor will other mechanisms be absent.

3. Risks and opportunities

3.1. Introduction

Leaving conceptual differences aside, most debate focuses on the dangers and benefits associated with hybrid organisations. On the basis of a literature review, we have identified three major types of risks and opportunities. The first concerns finance. On the one hand, there are fears that commercial ventures will rock the public purse, and on the other hand, there are hopes that they may generate

additional revenues to strengthen it. A second type of risk concerns culture. Some fear that the combination of ‘public’ and ‘private’ cultures of service provision will lead to confusion and moral degeneration; others hope that it will lead to a reinvigoration of static public service providers. We will discuss each of these in more detail in the following paragraph.

A third major issue that emerges from the literature concerns political control. Diversification of funding and looser and/or more complex regulatory systems can result in an increased autonomy of management. As a result, the political principals of hybrid organisations fear that they will lose their grip on the organisations in question and, by implication, on policy implementation. Such a lack of control is perceived to be especially problematic when goal displacement occurs, specifically, when hybrid organisations neglect their public tasks and focus primarily on their commercial activities, without sufficient means for public authorities to intervene. Indeed, in his study on *Freddie Mac* and *Fanny Mae*, Koppell (2003) argues that access to market funding allowed the organisations in question to coopt public authorities.

The question of control is highly relevant, but also exceedingly problematic, because it is conceptually unclear what constitutes a ‘sufficient’ level of political control (a discussion similar to those pursued in the wake of New Public Management-type reforms). Highlighted cases of loss of control are often those where organisations are overly powerful (e.g. *Fanny Mae* and *Freddie Mac*) or have ostensibly abandoned their original mission (e.g. the Tennessee Valley Authority). Here the issue is easily addressed. But what is the desired level of political control in cases where there is no outright goal displacement or fraud? This is not only a question of design, but also a political decision. In this version of the paper, we will concentrate our efforts on the other risks, which are more technical in nature.

3.2 Financial risks and opportunities

One of the recurring fears in the literature critical about hybrid organisations is that they could use public funds for commercial ventures and by doing so gain an

unfair advantage over their private competitors. An example is the use of publicly funded overhead (accommodation, administrative staff) for commercially funded projects, translating the advantage into lower prices. This will have the effect of distorting markets and, potentially, of creating implicit overcapacity at the taxpayer's expense. A second major risk is that money is thrown overboard in risky ventures resulting in high losses which the taxpayer will eventually have to reimburse (see OECD, 2004 for more on these risks). The problem here is the same as that faced by governments in the financial crisis with regard to banks: the organisations act as commercial ventures with respect to risk-taking, but unlike commercial ventures they cannot be allowed to collapse when risks materialise. The sums involved are not the same, but fundamentally the logic is.

There are also financial opportunities associated with hybrid organisations in the form of cross-subsidisation. Through commercial activities, they can potentially create extra revenues supporting their public services. The profits from luxury services to wealthy clients or commercial projects can be used to reduce rates for services to clients with limited means or to fund unprofitable projects, thereby reducing the demand on public funds or allowing higher quality levels without additional cost to the taxpayer. This is essentially an alternative form of progressive taxation at the level of implementation.

3.3 Conflicts of interests and values

A second potential risk coming out of the literature is of a cultural nature. This is based on the combination of two assumptions: first, that there is an essential distinction between the cultures of public and private organisations, meaning that they are driven by different sets of conflicting values; second, that organisations can only have one *Leitkultur*, or dominant culture, and that the combination of opposing core values within hybrid organisations can only yield dangers and tensions. That is why some critics have argued that public and private interests and values should be strictly separated. The late Jane Jacobs (1994), for instance, warned against the creation of 'monstrous moral hybrids', referring to the mafia as an example.

It is complicated and according to some impossible to objectively assign values to the ‘public’ or ‘private’ sphere. For example, a focus on efficiency and effectiveness can be associated with the private interest of an organisation, but also with the public interest as it diminishes the demand on public funding. Another problem is that it is not clear what units and levels of analysis are involved. For instance, many businesses are extremely hierarchical internally, whereas public service department can be highly competitive. Does that make the former public organisations and the latter private?²

What is more relevant is whether members of these organisations *perceive* tensions between different cultures of service provision. For instance, medical staff may be torn between the desire to offer patients every possible treatment (e.g. expensive new medicines) and the need to keep overall costs in check. In theory, tensions such as these can be a major stress factor to staff and ultimately even destabilise an organisation. Such problems are not exclusive to hybrid organisations. To continue the example, they also arise in public and commercial hospitals, since every healthy organisation necessarily has a ‘private’ interest in maintaining its financial viability and doctors adhere to the ‘public’ interest by virtue of their professionalism. However, inherent tensions are theoretically exacerbated in a context where there are both a heightened sensitivity to cost and heightened public accountability.

As with finances, there is also a cultural argument in favour of hybrid organisations. The tensions between conflicting or competing interests and values can lead to synergetic effects (In ‘t Veld, 1997; 2001). This might even lead to the creation of a totally new, hybrid culture for the organisations. Advocates of hybridisation argue that the combination of competing values will result in an increased level of innovation and higher-quality service provision.

² What is clear from the argument from the critics is that they presuppose that hybridisation unhinges what they consider a fair balance between relevant values and that this is harmful from the viewpoint of public policy. When the quality of public services is defined in terms of a fair balance between conflicting values expressed by these services, then hybridity could be said to reduce quality.

4. Empirical evidence

4.1 Research context and methodology

So much for expectations: what is real? As noted, there is virtually no systematic evidence on the performance of hybrid organisations, only isolated case studies that shed little light on the contingencies of performance. To our knowledge, the research programme on which we here report is the first to collect a broad range of data for a large number of organisations across various policy fields. The research on which our analysis is based was conducted at the Universities of Tilburg and Nijmegen and at the Netherlands School for Public Administration³. Specifically, it consisted of intensive case studies in a variety of policy fields, based on interviews and desk research, occasionally on participatory observation. These studies were brought together within a research network on hybrid organisations, as well as in various separate reports.

The policy fields examined empirically were vocational education (Honingh, 2006; 2008); public broadcasting (Van de Donk, 2006); social housing (Branden, 2004; 2006); universities (Mouwen, 2006); care for the elderly (Van Hout, 2006) and hospital care (Putters, 2006). In addition, we can draw on the results of a report by the Dutch National Court of Audit (2005), which has taken a keen interest in the matter (also see Montfort, 2008), the forthcoming doctoral thesis by Karré on hybrid waste management organisations and on a current research programme by the Netherlands School of Public Administration on public service provision through private, commercial companies (Karré et.al., 2007 & 2008).

Although there were some minor differences of definition and operationalisation, the studies were sufficiently similar to allow the comparison we will describe here. For reasons of space, we cannot describe each field in detail and will restrict ourselves to an overview of the general findings. Where we have significant differences between policy fields, we will mention them.

³ See www.hybridorganisations.com for more information.

4.2 Financial risks and opportunities

As noted, one of the chief risks emerging from the literature is that public funds leak into commercial ventures. Indeed, this has been the charge most frequently heard in political circles? Does the evidence support such claims? In a nutshell: no. There are no indications of systematic abuse of funding by hybrid organisations.

When the Dutch National Court of Audit (2005) looked into this matter, it came to ambiguous conclusions. The organisations it investigated had only to some extent established regular procedures to deal with commercial activities, which led to uncertainty over issues such as price calculation and the relative distribution of staff time. Yet as far as administrative barriers between different sources of funding were concerned, all organisations had done their homework and established clear rules, thus lowering the risk of money ‘leaking’. Their budgets were transparent (or, at least, not less transparent than before they engaged in commercial ventures). Generally, our overview of developments within various policy fields did not show any serious rise in problems. In certain policy fields there were incidents of financial mismanagement, where money was squandered in risky initiatives. For example, some social landlords and universities (justifiably) got into trouble over unwise investments in real estate. Yet there was no ostensible growth in the number of incidents of financial malpractice, as compared to the previous period when financing was exclusively public.

At the same time, there is also no clear evidence on whether hybridity results in financial benefits. Some organisations invented methods to apply the “Robin Hood principle”: steal from the rich, give to the poor. For instance, hospitals recently devised schemes to allow businesses to get their employees to the top of waiting lists, in exchange for additional charges that would be channelled towards regular health care. Such ideas caused major political turmoil as this would effectively transfer the task of redistribution from the national to the organisational level. Yet, perhaps because of such controversy, it has proved hard to acquire systematic data that clearly prove the benefits of cross-subsidisation. The overall effects of hybridisation are especially difficult to judge as they have

more often than not been accompanied by squeezes in public funding and increased levels of competition.

All in all, there appears to be no cause for alarm, but none for celebration either. Although much of the debate on hybrid organisations has revolved around financial question, the actual effects (albeit perhaps partly hidden) appear to be limited at best. This suggests that clear regulation on the administrative handling of different sources of funding has been sufficient to prevent the theoretically defined risks from turning into systematic design flaws. Once this became clear, calls for more radical interventions (e.g. the mandatory break-up of organisations into separate public and commercial entities) have become less frequent.

4.3 Cultural conflicts

It has been reasoned that, since hybridisation leads to organisations being forced to satisfy an increasing number of conflicting demands, they may lapse into a condition of cultural chaos. This is what Jane Jacobs (1994), in a different context, referred to as the creation of “monstrous moral hybrids”. Strong language indeed, implicating that competing external demands, expressing different values, would translate directly towards the normative templates of staff. If one is pessimistically inclined, this would result in confusion or deterioration; a more optimistic view sees it as an incentive for innovation.

At the top- and middle management level of organisations, there is some evidence to support this, with managers reporting that they now feel more pressure and are faced with more difficult trade-offs.⁴ As a result, managers have to shift between different roles. In their communication with their political principals, they need to exude more certainty and balance than their strategies could allow. This is of course always the case, but hybridisation tends to increase the numbers of ways in which organisations can fail, making them politically vulnerable in a risk-averse climate.

⁴ Evers (2004) has justifiably noted that, while it is theoretically easy to argue for balancing different values, it is more realistic to assume that such a balance cannot be achieved in practice, especially when different stakeholders have varying views on what constitutes a proper balance.

An immediate effect of hybridisation we could observe was a wave of innovation, aimed at heightening both input and output legitimacy. Most organisations have revamped their methods of communicating with stakeholders and adopted more customer-friendly practices. It has also led to a rise of ‘strategic alliances’, with organisations from fields working together to realise new service concepts (Brandsen & Van Hout, 2006). In that sense, the evidence suggests that both cultural risks and opportunities are realised.

However, evidence at the ‘street level’ shows a different picture. Some commentators have conjured up frightening images of hard-working professionals torn between commitment to clients and the commercial aspirations of their superiors. In fact, research shows that most staff did barely notice hybridisation in any direct sense. Where they did, it was in policy fields where commercial activities constituted a directly identifiable addition to regular working routines. This was especially the case in various branches of education, where teachers became involved in contract-based projects that stood clearly apart from their regular activities. Elsewhere, the effects of hybridisation mostly came in the shape of a stronger formalisation of tasks and output measurement, as well as an increase in workload. This created stress and was experienced as unpleasant. Some, like Brandsen et.al. (2005) and Honingh (2008) have argued that these effects have nothing to do with a perceived cultural conflict whereas others, like Karré (2009) argue that stress induced by a new focus on efficiency and entrepreneurialism should be treated as an effect of hybridity. The difference appears to relate to the level of professionalism in the fields in question. The evidence suggests that the higher the degree of professionalism, the lower the stress experienced as a result of hybridisation. By implication, the more loosely coupled an organisation is, the more likely the risk of cultural conflict is as well. This is in line with findings from the institutionalist school in organisational analysis.

5. Implications

One must conclude that, although there have been serious incidences of abuse involving hybrid organisations, the risks have generally been overstated. A number of authors predicted that hybrid organisations pose unacceptable hazards to the provision of public services. However, the available evidence suggests that these risks have been overstated. Our research indicates that few of the expected risks have materialised into real difficulties. Although questions remain over the financial transparency of hybrid organisations, there is no systematic evidence of cross-subsidisation from public to commercial activities (or, for that matter, vice versa). Culturally, critics predicted moral confusion and degradation. However, it appears that only under specific circumstances hybridisation actually translates into tensions and conflicts over values, and this mostly at the management level rather than at lower levels of the organisation. When this happens, the effect was ambiguous: it did create tensions, but also encouraged organisations to innovate. In short, the effects of hybridisation have generally been limited and mixed. There appears to be no cause for drastic action one way or the other.

This is a surprisingly positive outcome, given the generally negative tone of the debate on this type of organisation. It leads on to the interesting question what conditions have led to this favourable outcome. On the basis of our findings, we can identify at least two key conditions:

- A degree of professionalism within an organisation makes it more resistant to the pressures of hybridisation at the cultural level. This is both related to the nature of the work in question (which tends to be more insulated from organisational pressures in any case) and to the cultural ‘anchor’ that professional norms offer.

- At an early stage, supervisory bodies such as the National Auditing Office developed and enforced clear generic guidelines concerning the administrative handling of diversified funding streams. While these were not implemented overnight, they provided a clear framework against which the financial performance of organisations could be judged.

In both cases, it is about replacing one type of rule with another. In a future version of this paper, we will elaborate on these conditions for the successful performance of hybrid organisations.

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