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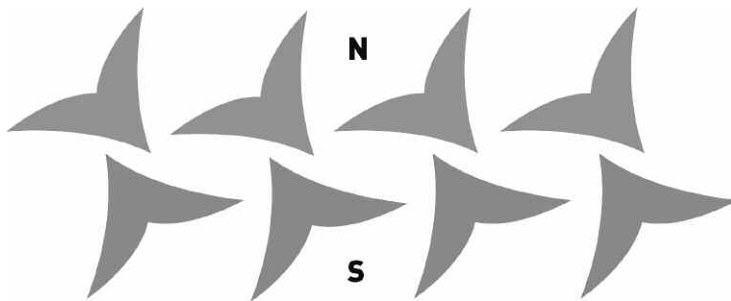
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*Local governments  
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who, what and why?*



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***Local governments and the communication of demographic decline in Sweden and Germany: who, what and why?***

***Highlights:***

1. Many planners and politicians still employ growth-oriented policies even when they have to manage decline.
2. Communicating the consequences of demographic decline can on the one hand be seen as something commendable. On the other hand, it has also been understood to potentially impair the image of a place. This paper explores this dilemma.
3. The general aim of this paper is to deepen our understanding of public communication in processes of demographic decline.
4. Demographic change does not appear to be a recurrent topic in local governmental communication, either in the German or the Swedish case.
5. It is far from evident that processes of demographic decline are explicitly communicated by elected politicians. Rather, there seems to be a tendency to depoliticise these issues, in the sense that civil servants and communication officers are framed as important communicative agents.

***Abstract:*** Several studies have examined how local governments respond to the implications of shrinkage. This article adds to this knowledge by focusing on local governmental communication in processes of demographic decline. Hypothetically, local governments can contribute to a greater understanding of the causes and consequences of demographic decline, to greater legitimacy for the political decisions made in response, and to a vivid discussion of what the future could look like in shrinking community. Our results, drawn from a study in Sweden and in Germany, however suggest that local governmental communication is an expertocratic practice used to avoid conflict about future developments.

***Keywords:*** Demographic decline, shrinkage, communication, Sweden, Germany, depopulation.

***Gobiernos locales y la comunicación del declive demográfico en Suecia y Alemania: ¿Quién, qué y por qué?***

***Ideas clave:***

1. Muchos planificadores y gestores públicos todavía recurren a políticas orientadas al crecimiento, incluso cuando tienen que gestionar el proceso inverso.
2. Comunicar las consecuencias del declive demográfico puede, por un lado, ser visto como algo encomiable. Por otra parte, también se ha entendido que perjudica potencialmente la imagen de un lugar. Este artículo explora este dilema.
3. El objetivo general de este artículo es profundizar nuestra comprensión de la comunicación pública en los procesos de declive demográfico.

4. El cambio demográfico no aparenta ser un tema recurrente en la comunicación gubernamental local, ni en el caso alemán ni en el sueco.
5. Está lejos de ser evidente que los procesos de declive demográfico son comunicados explícitamente por los políticos elegidos. Más bien, parece haber una tendencia a despolitizar estos temas, en el sentido de que los funcionarios públicos y los oficiales de comunicación se enmarcan como importantes agentes comunicativos.

*Resumen:* Varios estudios han examinado la forma en que los gobiernos locales responden a las implicaciones de la despoblación. Este artículo amplía estos conocimientos centrándose en la comunicación de los gobiernos locales en los procesos de declive demográfico. Hipotéticamente, los gobiernos locales pueden contribuir a una mayor comprensión de las causas y consecuencias del declive demográfico, a una mayor legitimidad de las decisiones políticas adoptadas en respuesta a él y a un debate vivo sobre cómo podría ser el futuro en una comunidad en declive. Sin embargo, nuestros resultados, extraídos de un estudio realizado en Suecia y Alemania, sugieren que la comunicación de los gobiernos locales es una práctica expertocrática utilizada para evitar conflictos sobre futuros desarrollos.

*Palabras clave:* Declive demográfico, contracción, comunicación, Suecia, Alemania, despoblación.

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## 1. *Introduction*

The planning and policy implications of demographic decline have attracted increasing interest during the last decade – in both research and public policy. Today, it is well known that even though the factors driving demographic decline lie beyond the direct control of local planning and policy systems, its consequences must be handled by such systems.

Shrinking areas are often framed as "less favoured areas" (Ribeiro and Marques, 2002), where political agendas include demanding issues such as over-dimensioned infrastructure (Sousa and Pinho, 2015; Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012), decreasing labour-related tax revenues (Haase, Hospers, Pekelsma and Rink, 2012; Hollander, 2011), rising per-capita expenditures for social services, and increasing tax rates and fees (Fjertorp, 2013), as well as emerging pessimism among residents and a loss of trust in local government (Matthiesen, 2005).

Several studies have examined how local governments respond to the implications of demographic decline. Many of them demonstrate that, since growth is such a dominant contemporary norm, demographic decline has been widely disregarded in local policy and planning (Bontje, 2005; Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Martinez-Fernandez, Audirac, Fol and Cunningham-Sabot, 2012; Sousa and Pinho, 2015; Schatz, 2017). Unrealistic and biased ideas about growth and the negative

framing of demographic decline (Martinez Fernandez *et al.*, 2012; Sousa and Pinho, 2015; Schatz, 2017) have even been understood as "hindering proactive strategies in managing decline" (Lang, 2012, p. 1748), or as intensifying the negative consequences of shrinkage, since "planning for shrinking cities does not work if it presupposes urban growth" (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012, pp. 261 and 263).

Even though recent studies (Pallagst, Fleschurz and Said, 2017) indicate that growth-centred planning perspectives are, at least in part, accompanied by perspectives of degrowth, there is no sign of a shift of paradigms in policy or planning (Schatz, 2017). As Schatz (2017) states, many planners and politicians still employ growth-oriented policies even when they have to manage decline.

### ***Local governmental communication***

In this article, we seek to contribute to the emerging literature discussing planning and policy responses to long-term depopulation. Our point of departure is that local governmental communication is an important aspect of local policy and planning processes. We suppose that, through their communication, local governments can hypothetically contribute to a greater understanding of the causes and consequences of demographic decline, as well as to greater legitimacy for the political decisions made in response to population decline, and a vivid discussion of what the future could look like in a community faced with continued and prevalent population decline. A consistent framing of a situation can make actions appear "desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

Nevertheless, research points to a strong belief among local policymakers that talking about shrinking processes will make them self-fulfilling prophecies (Haase *et al.*, 2012, p. 13; Syssner, 2016; 2018). That is, it is widely believed that, if key actors in society talk about a place as being in decline, it will inevitably be recognised as such. One consequence thereof, it is believed, is that people will be even more hesitant about residing or investing in such a place. This implies that open communication about the challenges of demographic decline is understood to deepen the problems for the local community.

Thus, communicating the consequences of demographic decline can on the one hand be seen as something commendable. On the other hand, it has also been understood to potentially impair the image of a place. This paper explores this dilemma.

## ***Aim of the paper***

The general aim of this paper is to deepen our understanding of public communication in processes of demographic decline. More precisely, we seek to elucidate how local government representatives (LGRs) seek to communicate demographic decline, to highlight the conditions under which this communication takes place, and to deconstruct some of the challenges and dilemmas involved in this particular form of communication. To address this issue, we raise the following research questions:

How do local government representatives in shrinking municipalities conceptualise their role in communicating demographic decline?

How is this understanding translated into a communicative *practice*, including *who* are understood to be the main communicating agents, *what* is being communicated, and with what *intention*?

By responding to these questions, we seek to contribute primarily to the literature that has observed, but not further analysed, the communicative challenges and dilemmas of population decline. However, the study may also be of empirical interest to those with a wider interest in the intersection of local politics, planning, and communication.

## ***Our cases***

The results presented below derive from a broader comparative study of depopulation and shrinkage undertaken by the authors. This broader study included a wide range of policy- and planning-related aspects of depopulation, and was performed at local levels of government in several parts of Germany and Sweden. Since communication stood out as important to explore, a special sub-study was devoted to this issue. Six shrinking municipalities in the Swedish county of Västerbotten and the German county of Göttingen were included in the sub-study<sup>1</sup>. These cases share the common properties (Sartori, 1991) of being "less favoured areas" (Ribeiro and Marques, 2002), facing long-term demographic decline, and exhibiting

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1• For the purpose of this study, we defined a shrinking municipality as one that has experienced a population loss of at least 10 % compared with the reference year 1990.

local governments that need to cope with and respond to the consequences of this development. In many other respects, however, they differ from each other.

Previous studies (Syssner, 2006; 2016; 2018) indicate that local governments in Sweden are as "caught up in the growth paradigm" (Hospers and Reverda, 2015, p. 39) as local governments in any other part of Europe. In this respect, Germany is often put forward as a positive example. Due to the dramatic changes that occurred after the reunification of East and West Germany, shrinkage has become a significant topic in urban and regional planning in Germany (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012). Several studies report that talking about shrinkage is a normal activity in German politics and planning (Lang, 2012) and that a large proportion of the research on shrinkage has been conducted in Germany (Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Shetty and Luescher, 2010).

## 2. *The dilemma of communicating shrinkage*

Given the many implications of demographic decline, it may not come as a surprise that shrinkage is framed negatively in public discourse. As a matter of fact, several studies have demonstrated that shrinkage and demographic decline are often perceived as tragic and deeply problematic, and that shrinking places are where "the losers of the so-called globalized economy live" (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, p. 15; Martinez Fernandez *et al.*, 2012; Camarda, Rotondo and Selicato, 2015).

In the literature on shrinkage, however, it has become commonplace to note that depopulation is framed so negatively not only because of its actual disadvantages and consequential effects but also because growth is such a dominant contemporary norm in society (Bontje, 2005; Shetty and Luescher, 2010; Wiechmann and Pallagst, 2012; Martinez-Fernandez *et al.*, 2012; Sousa and Pinho, 2015; Hospers, 2013a; Hospers, 2013b; Camarda *et al.*, 2015; Wiechmann and Bontje, 2015; see also Leo and Anderson, 2006; Syssner, 2006; 2016; 2018).

Since growth and population increase have become important signal values in politics, population decline "carries the negative weight of a symptom of an undesirable disease" (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, p. 13) and has come to be associated with "a certain stigma" (Martinez Fernandez *et al.*, 2012, p. 220).

Stigmatisation, importantly, has been described by Goffman (1963) as the process through which a negative attribute leads to the whole of that which is

stigmatised being reduced to whatever the stigma itself symbolises. From this perspective, a shrinking municipality is reduced to being simply a municipality which is shrinking, and nothing else.

Goffman's theories about stigma form the basis for the concept of *territorial stigmatisation*. Wacquant *et al.* (2014, p. 1270) have elaborated this concept to acquire a better understanding of how "discrediting differentness" and "the blemish of place" impact upon various actors: residents, entrepreneurs, business interests, public bureaucracies, journalists, scholars, and politicians, as well as upon state-level bureaucracies and policies. In recent years, this concept has been applied and further developed in relation to a wide variety of socially and economically marginalised places, including: public housing areas (August, 2014), disadvantaged urban areas (Graham *et al.*, 2016), post-industrial cities (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira, 2014), peripheralised regions (Weck and Beißwenger, 2014; Meyer, Miggelbrink, and Schwarzenberg, 2017), etc. These studies suggest that those who reside in stigmatised areas are also affected by the stigma in the sense that it influences how they view themselves and their surroundings, and how they are viewed by others (Graham *et al.*, 2016; Meyer *et al.*, 2017). It is also suggested that stigmatising discourses can justify controversial top-down policy interventions in the areas concerned (August, 2014).

Studies of shrinking areas have addressed the role of socio-spatial stigmatisation in young people's perceptions of their future and their decisions to out-migrate (Meyer *et al.*, 2017). Studies from shrinking areas also suggest that peripheralisation as such is connected with stigmatisation (Weck and Beißwenger, 2014, p. 1), and that population decline involves aspects of shame among citizens who "themselves have internalized the perception of failure" (Sousa and Pinho, 2015, p. 14).

Several studies indicate that population decline can be regarded as a stigma. It is well established that local policymakers tend to believe that if they talk about their community as a shrinking one, they will contribute to a further decline. If a place is widely associated with decline, fewer people will choose to move to or invest in that place, the argument goes (Haase *et al.*, 2012, p. 13; Syssner, 2016; 2018).

The reluctance to communicate openly about shrinkage and depopulation can be contrasted with the communicative ideals of our time. Thus, in planning studies, communication is often understood as an intrinsic democratic value, as something that fosters citizen participation and may result in valuable input from citizens (Healey, 2006; see also Bovaird, 2007). An important starting point for a collaborative and communicative approach to planning is that the goal of planning should not be predetermined but should emerge in dialogue with citizens (Healey, 2006).

The rise of the communicative ideal in planning partially overlaps with the paradigmatic change from government to governance. In a wide variety of scholarly contexts, governance has been portrayed as an alternative to top-down government, including new forms of interactive network management, whereby a range of stakeholders takes part in the governance of society (Montin and Hedlund, 2009; Benz, Lütz, Schimank and Simonis, 2007; Kooiman, 2003; Mayntz, 2003; Pierre, 2000).

Parts of the literature on governance have focused specifically on the role of communication. Some studies suggest that contemporary public governance is characterised by "communicative relationship(s)" (Bang, 2003, p. 7) between a broad range of actors. Others suggest that, with the shift from government to governance, governmental communication has moved far beyond its traditional domain of "information and persuasion" (Crozier, 2007, p. 2). In this context, the concept of "recursive governance" (Crozier, 2007, p. 9) has been developed to capture the notion of political communication as a part of policy processes that have uncertain outcomes (Crozier, 2007).

If we take into account the ideals that are put forward within the paradigm of collaborative planning and recursive governance, we could assume that LGRs would speak openly and willingly with citizens about the challenges of shrinkage. According to these ideals, public communication in shrinking communities may have the potential to fulfil a mixture of political, civic, and learning purposes (see e.g. Oscarsson, Naurin, and Håkansson, 2008; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995, p. 222).

### 3. *Methods and material*

This comparative interview study forms part of a broader study of the policy and planning implications of depopulation and shrinkage in Germany and Sweden. In this paper, the German case under study is Göttingen County, located in the eastern part of former West Germany. The median municipality in the county has a population size of 9.956 residents and stretches over 74 square kilometres, resulting in a relatively high median population density of 180 residents per square kilometre. The Swedish case under study is Västerbotten County in the northern part of Sweden. The median municipality in the county has a population size of 5.657 residents and extends over about 2.697 square kilometres, resulting in a median population density of about two residents per square kilometre (SCB, 2015).

## ***Empirical data***

The comparative case study approach allows an analysis of how the communication of demographic decline is understood in different settings. In order to gain a more profound understanding of how LGRs translate their understanding into communicative practice, twelve semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted with six local government representatives<sup>2</sup>. The interviews were conducted in two rounds between April 2016 and January 2017. All interviews were conducted on site – directly in connection with the informant's workplace and in the local language. All interviews were voice-recorded, and then transcribed into standard German or standard Swedish. The interviews had an average length of 57 minutes. In the first round, local contexts and problem framings were the focus. The second round of interviews was exclusively dedicated to exploring local governmental communication. In our analysis, we start from an interpretive tradition (Yanow, 2000) in order to grasp how informants understand and conceptualise their communicative practice.

## ***Analytical framework***

To provide structure to our analysis of the interviews, we developed an analytical framework that essentially draws upon Lasswell's (1948) classic model of communication (see also Lasswell, 1936). Although it has been criticised for its conceptualisation of communication as a linear process (Schramm, 1983), Lasswell's classic formula of "who says what in which channel to whom with what effect" (Lasswell, 1958, p. 250) still offers analytical power by identifying some central aspects of the communication process (for a discussion see Sapienza, Narayanan, and Veenstra, 2015). Thus, as suggested by Lasswell (1968, p. 62) in one of his later works, it is highly relevant to empirically study (public) communication by asking *who* the communicating agents are, *what* intentions they have, in what *situations* communication occurs, what *assets* these agents can access, what *strategies* are used, and what *audiences* are reached with what *result*.

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2• Swedish: *Kommunstyrelsens ordförande*; German: *Bürgermeister*.

Based on Lasswell's recommendation to modify his model depending upon need (Lasswell 1948, see also Sapienza *et al.*, 2015, p. 609), we have simplified it into three interrelated questions, which will guide our analysis:

*Who* is understood to represent local government in local governmental communication? *What* are these actors understood to communicate? *Why* does this communication take place at all, i.e. what are the *intentions* (rather than effects) of local governmental communication?

## 4. Results

Our findings, described below, illustrate local governmental communication as an expertocratic practice that is used to avoid, diminish, or deny conflict about future developments. The prospects for an open public debate that could potentially pave the way towards alternative futures are bleak. Since dissent and conflict are seen as deeply problematic, local governmental communication is at risk of losing its genuinely "political" dimensions. The results and implications thereof are summarised in Table 1, below.

### ***Who is communicating?***

Previous studies indicate a belief among LGRs that talking about demographic decline will promote further decline. It is also evident that growth – as opposed to shrinkage – is understood to provide political leaders with symbolic capital. Given this, it is interesting to elucidate *who* the actors are who are believed to carry the responsibility for talking about these sensitive issues in public. In our analysis of the interviews, firstly, we discovered that the informants make a distinction between the communicative task of politicians versus that of civil servants. Secondly, we discovered that they make a distinction between specialists and generalists – among both politicians and civil servants. Thirdly, informants refer to press officers and other professional communicators as being essential to the communication of political decisions. *Who* the communicative agent is expected to be, however, is interpreted differently in different contexts.

Our first observation is that all of our informants fulfil a dual role, as they represent both their respective political party and the local government. In addition, each German informant maintains a dual local government function, being both the chairman of the council and the chief executive of the administration (Bogumil and Holtkamp, 2013, p. 40). Due to these dual roles, we were able to observe an administrative as well as a political logic in our informants' understanding of local governmental communication.

In Sweden, our informants expressed a need to distribute communicative tasks more systematically between local politicians and the administration. However, it does not appear to be easy to determine who has the responsibility for communication in various situations. In one interview, a Swedish LGR (*Municipality C*, 2016b) stated that cutbacks and other political decisions related to demographic decline tend to reach the media rather quickly, and that employees and citizens who are affected by these decisions would prefer to be informed about them – by civil servants – beforehand. Another interview indicated that it is not entirely clear whether it is politicians who are expected to respond to questions from the media and citizens regarding political decisions. Instead, the chief executive of the administration is understood to constitute the link between local government and the media (LGR *Municipality A*, 2017).

In German municipalities, the line between politics and administration is repeatedly blurred. This is emphasised by the recent introduction of the position of *Bürgermeister*:

Actually, I don't see myself [exclusively] as a local politician [...]. Back in the day, we used to have these distributed responsibilities. On the one hand, there was a Municipal Director, and on the other hand, an Honorary Mayor, emphasising separate administrative and political duties. Today, it is a conflated task [of the *Bürgermeister*], who has a hybrid status and tries to reconcile both parts.

(LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a)

Our material suggests that this "hybrid status" leaves some room for interpretation, thus opening a potential doorway for LGRs to withdraw from their responsibilities as a politician in favour of "bureaucratic" responsibility, when it comes to intricate demography-related issues (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016b). Another LGR (*Municipality F*, 2016b) is seeking to redistribute the communicative burden from himself as an individual, to a network of political representatives. A third LGR (*Municipality E*, 2016b) expressed an ambition to overcome the clear distinction between local politics and administration, in favour of what he describes as "a consistent public image". Under this "managerial" approach, politics and

administration are integrated with each other, with the possible implication that the ideological dimension of the former is being subordinated.

Either way, these examples suggest that German LGRs, despite their prominent position, seek to collectivise the responsibility for communicating demographic decline. In this respect, "local presidentialism" (Wollmann, 2012, p. 50) may be a misleading concept, if we want to understand communication about demographic decline in German municipalities.

Our second observation is that some of the informants make explicit or implicit distinctions between specialists and generalists. One German informant believed that political generalists are more communicative than specialists, although specialists' knowledge is essential in political decision-making. That is, communication skills are understood to be important, although they do not completely outweigh expertise in a particular field (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016b).

In contrast, one Swedish informant referred to the importance of having not only the mayor present when sensitive decisions are communicated, but also political representatives from the political committee (Swedish: *nämnd*) through which the decision was made (LGR *Municipality A*, 2017). That is, political specialists are understood to have knowledge about details that a mayor may lack, implying that it is the specialists who are in charge of communicating potentially contested decisions.

Our third observation is that professional press officers are understood to maintain a central position in the communication of political decisions. In the German municipalities, public relations are commonly framed as being an administrative – not political – task (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016b). The Swedish interviewees generally highlighted the importance of the press officer, who coordinates both internal and external communication, and manages the quality of every message prior to its release (LGR *Municipality A*, 2017; LGR *Municipality B*, 2017). One valued quality of the press officer is the alleged capacity to understand how citizens are likely to respond to information given out by local government. Another capacity that was ascribed to the press officer by informants is the ability to make information from local government appear less partisan:

If I myself were to write this, the other parties would probably oppose it, like, "We've no objections against what you've written but it's gonna be too much social democracy in the media." Now that a press officer arranges fact-based

information about a process [...] this is perceived as more neutral, even though the decision entails politics.

(LGR Municipality A, 2017)

The significance of professionals who are capable of de-emphasising party politics recurs in other settings too. The following interviewee is referring to a meeting with citizens to discuss a school closure:

The school meetings have been organised around neutral persons who act as moderators. We, on the part of the municipality, chose people who we know haven't had a political image but enjoy confidence from all sides. Sometimes entrepreneurs or persons in other functions fulfilled this role.

(LGR Municipality A, 2017)

### **What is communicated?**

Demographic decline has serious implications for both policy and planning at the local level. It is often perceived as a sensitive and complex subject. Therefore, it is interesting to examine how this topic is described and discussed in public communication. What do LGRs understand as being important to communicate in these contexts? Is it information about the demographic state of affairs, information about decisions that have already been made by the local government, or ideas regarding future development? We briefly identify two communicative strategies here: *information* and *branding*.

To begin with, all informants believed that local governmental communication should be unbiased and fact-based. Visions and political opinions "have to be communicated in another way" (LGR Municipality B, 2017), such as in political decrees or "election programmes" (LGR Municipality D, 2016a). Given that factual information is presented as an important part of the informants' communication strategies, it is worth reflecting upon what LGRs consider it necessary to inform the public about. As far as we could ascertain, none of the local governments included in our study were informing their citizens about the demographic state of affairs in the municipality, or about the long-term demographic prognosis, or about the long-term strategies of the local government:

The question presumes demographic change shaping my daily work routines. This is simply not the case. [...] I can't remember ever having approached one of our fellow citizens, like, "Is it clear to you that we're living in an ageing society?" This issue, however, proceeds in the background, involving simply everything. It certainly happens more often that we discuss the issue with citizens than I'm actually able to recall [but] we don't do it consciously.

(LGR *Municipality D*, 2016b)

This is a non-question, a question that no one poses. Citizens don't bother about whether we're going to lose six or seven [residents]. This is a non-question to them. In contrast, and what they indeed do bother about, is whether we create [...] 100 new jobs, whether a new business is to be located here, or if we need to close a care facility. [...] Through all these years, I never had to meet any question about "What are you doing to address [the situation] that we're becoming fewer?"

(LGR *Municipality C*, 2016a)

In general, the LGRs in our study referred to the approval of local budgets and cost-benefit ratios as being important issues to inform citizens about (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016a; LGR *Municipality E*, 2016b; LGR *Municipality A*, 2017; LGR *Municipality B*, 2017). In Germany, the LGRs reflected on how they seek to justify unpopular decisions, such as cuts to services or tax increases, by referring to facts about constrained municipal funds (see also *Municipality F*, 2016b):

Well, how do you justify your decision if your wife demands a Porsche but you barely have enough money for a Golf? Do you get into debt so that, in the end, you won't find anyone who will grant you a loan? Basically, it is of course the budget that serves as a justification for such things. [...] We don't close [public facilities] for fun but rather because we can't meet the costs any longer.

(LGR *Municipality D*, 2016b)

Every LGR included in our study shared experiences of communicating demography-related decisions, including cuts to public services, tax increases, and infrastructure maintenance. Local governmental communication, both in Sweden and Germany, thus seems to be mainly concerned with communicating political decisions that are presumed to have implications for the everyday lives of citizens (LGR *Municipality C*, 2016b):

So, [we speak about] issues that immediately affect individual finances, and a remarkable issue in this respect is how demographic development is affecting schools. Now, and most intensively, we're spending time dealing with the closing of an elementary school [...].

(LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a)

However, Swedish LGRs commented that users would not simply suffer from the cutting of municipal services, but would rather gain from improvements in quality. Over-large schools with uneducated teaching staff and retirement homes with empty beds that offer a low quality of service constitute two such examples (LGR *Municipality C*, 2016b):

[...] I'm defending the quality of schools. [...] Yet, we've had a lot of discussions in the villages [...], because there are indeed people working in the schools who don't have a pedagogic background. [...] getting educated in [such a] class means that we would squander our children's future, who are the workforce of tomorrow.

(LGR *Municipality A*, 2017)

Against this background, and somewhat paradoxically, both the German and Swedish LGRs understand their communicative mission as being to "exhibit a positive self-concept" (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a) to the local community. Pursuing a positive image for the municipality is generally understood as a means of countering the perceived "downward trend" (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016a). A Swedish LGR (*Municipality B*, 2017) stated that the municipality ought to "produce at least one good piece of news a week [...]", as good news is perceived to be "a very important part of creating community pride and our brand" (*Municipality B*, 2017). In our material, we found several branding strategies, more or less developed and sometimes overlapping, that emphasised heritage (LGR *Municipality F*, 2016b), civic engagement (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016a), deceleration (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a), quality of life (LGR *Municipality A*, 2016), proximity to (coastal) growth centres (LGR *Municipality C*, 2016a), and entrepreneurial spirit (LGR *Municipality B*, 2016).

### **Why communicate?**

Returning to the question of how LGRs frame the role of communication in processes of demographic decline, it is relevant to ask *why* they engage in public communication at all.

Firstly, we found some evidence for communication being used by LGRs as a means of creating an impression of stability. Several informants referred to a reluctance to even bring up demographic decline in debate, let alone referring to it as a problem. Even though our informants stated that demographic data is easily accessible through, for example, the *Landesamt für Statistik* (LGR *Municipality F*, 2016a), demographic decline does not appear to be a topic for discussion. When it is referred to, we have observed a tendency to trivialise it (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a), and to refer to problems related to demographic decline as being *general* problems, which are shared by many other locations and are thus not urgent (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016a).

In this context, we have observed that our informants frame local governmental communication as a means of demonstrating capability – of the polity, as well as of the local community as such (LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a):

In my experience, planning for new housing is something that's very positively received. Just for showing something; showing that things are about to happen despite all that. Now things are proceeding, moving, developing, and so forth.

(LGR *Municipality B*, 2017)

The ambition to create an impression of stability is linked to the idea of branding, as a means of creating a positive atmosphere among citizens – a feeling of pride and optimism. In a discussion about selective outmigration, one informant stated that an aim of local governmental communication is to counterbalance negative images:

Well, you could disparage yourself, drowning in a downward spiral. On that front, you have to counteract somewhat.

(LGR *Municipality D*, 2016a)

To some extent, our informants referred to local governmental communication initiatives as a means of gathering knowledge, ideas, and input from citizens (LGR *Municipality F*, 2016b; LGR *Municipality E*, 2016a; LGR *Municipality B*, 2017). However, many of the interviewees considered establishing a dialogue with citizens to be very difficult (LGR *Municipality A*, 2017; LGR *Municipality F*, 2016a). In fact, some informants even referred to dialogue as a potential threat or hindrance to their political work (LGR *Municipality D*, 2016b). The LGR of *Municipality C* (2016b), who represents a party that received more than 50 % of the votes in the last election,

repeatedly stated that, in essence, local elections provide citizens with sufficient opportunity to express their opinions. In a reference to a controversial decision, (s)he stated that "Our fellow citizens voted for this, so it's all about executing this order" (*Municipality C*, 2016b; see also *LGR Municipality F*, 2016b). In the same vein, (s)he exhorted:

Get your documents, make a decision, and implement! This is how you get trust from citizens. They don't necessarily need to sympathise with the decision, but they see progress.

(*LGR Municipality C*, 2016b)

Here, our interpretation is that the capacity to make decisions and implement them is what is understood to give legitimacy to local government – rather than a dialogue-oriented local governmental communication.

Secondly, we saw that the aim of local governmental communication is often understood as explaining the state of affairs to citizens. Paradoxically, in the interviews, our informants referred to their communicative practices in terms of transparency, visibility, accessibility, neutrality, rapidity, and plurality of opinions. Still, LGRs stated in the interviews that they experience a "lack of knowledge" (*LGR Municipality D*, 2016b) or "delusions" (*LGR Municipality B*, 2017) among citizens. A general assumption among our informants was that it would be "advantageous to be better informed" (*LGR Municipality B*, 2017). That is, information is understood as a pathway to citizen enlightenment. In the LGRs' experience, this task has become somewhat relocated, from the local press to municipalities (*LGR Municipality B*, 2017):

The public announcements and news we publish [on social media] [...] make information accessible to both those who don't read their morning newspaper and those who are generally uninterested. So, we provide them with at least some pieces of information. As we monitor the shares, we see that at least some people found it important, [and are] informing others.

(*LGR Municipality E*, 2016b)

*Table 1.*  
*The State and Prospects of Communicating the Challenges of Demographic Decline*

| Question | Answer                 | Possible implication                                                                                           |
|----------|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Who      | Civil servants         | Low prospects of a wider, political, and future-oriented public debate.                                        |
|          | Specialists            |                                                                                                                |
|          | Neutral professionals  |                                                                                                                |
| What     | Shrinkage not an issue | Low prospects of an open discussion on values, interests, and prioritisations in times of demographic decline. |
|          | Information            |                                                                                                                |
|          | Branding               |                                                                                                                |
| Why      | Create stability       | Low prospects of involving citizens in public debate about the future of the shrinking municipality.           |
|          | Demonstrate capability |                                                                                                                |
|          | Educating purposes     |                                                                                                                |

## 5. Conclusion

In this study, we set out with the general aim of providing a deeper understanding of public communication in processes of demographic decline. Since little has been published on this particular topic, we sought to add to the literature on how local governments handle shrinkage by elucidating how LGRs frame the role of communication in processes of demographic decline. Based on twelve interviews with six informants, we investigated how LGRs in shrinking municipalities conceptualize their role in communicating demographic decline, and how they translate this understanding into a communicative practice, including the following questions: *Who* are understood as the main communicating agents? *What* is being communicated, and with what *intention*?

When we reflect upon the differences and similarities between our cases, we see that, in the Swedish case, LGRs express an ambition "depoliticise" communication (e.g. by means of "neutral" experts and/or press officers). In the German context, fact-based information is as important for the informants as it is in the Swedish case.

"Depoliticisation", however, has different connotations in Germany, since German LGRs see themselves as bureaucrats with a rather pragmatic approach to politics. The similarities between the cases of Sweden and Germany are far more numerous than the differences. This finding is interesting, given that Germany is presented as a teaching example while Sweden is not, and that the structural preconditions differ significantly between the cases. In Table 1, above, we structure the questions we raised, along with a generalisation of the answers provided in the interviews. We also provide the potential practical and political implications thereof.

Firstly, we conclude that it is far from evident that processes of demographic decline are explicitly communicated by elected politicians. Rather, there seems to be a tendency to depoliticise these issues, in the sense that civil servants and communication officers are framed as important communicative agents. We also observed a tendency to focus on details when decisions related to shrinkage are communicated. Rather than accounting for the wider picture in terms of demographic change and its implications, communication seems to focus on specific decisions that the citizens are to be informed about.

Secondly, although demographic change seems to fall outside of what local governments communicate, *facts* are a dominant value in local governmental communication. Information from local government is presented as fact-based, unbiased, and characterised by the absence of partisan tendencies. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the value of branding and the idea of a positive "image" as being important recurs in almost every interview.

Thirdly, local governmental communication seems to be very much caught up in its traditional domains of information and persuasion. Terms such as "delusion" and "enlightenment" that were used by the interviewees suggest a traditional bureaucratic concept of government, in which facts are more or less indisputable. We also observed that our informants in both Sweden and Germany referred to what they viewed as their responsibility – that is, to keep people informed about what is going on in the municipality and what decisions are being taken. There seems to be little room for a discussion on alternative decisions or alternative futures for a shrinking community.

In conclusion, demographic change does not appear to be a recurrent topic in local governmental communication, either in the German or the Swedish case. Depopulation still seems to be a stigma and the growth norm persists in these areas, although they have been largely characterised by population decline over the past several decades.

Despite the ideals of communicative, interactive, and recursive governance, local government representatives seem to be extremely unwilling to even talk about the future of their community in terms of a future that is characterised by population decline (see also Syssner, 2016; 2018). When communication does occur, it is highly depoliticised and fact-oriented; it is focused on informing citizens, invoking feelings of pride and optimism, and establishing a positive atmosphere in the local community. It seems obvious that the LGRs are striving to avoid the territorial stigmatisation that a "discrediting differentness" (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014, p. 1270) may bring to a place.

Here, we see a parallel with what other scholars have identified as the neutralisation of politics, or as technocratic or post-democratic forms of governance (Flinders and Wood, 2014). More precisely, the observations made in our study suggest that our case is a case of governmental depoliticisation, whereby political leaders delegate functions to civil servants, experts or neutral mediating agents (Wood and Flinders, 2014).

From a democratic perspective, this development is deeply problematic. If local governmental communication remains an expertocratic practice, in which different and conflicting interpretations about future developments are avoided, the prospects for a wider public debate are bleak. One possible implication of such a communicative practice is a growing populism and distrust, a lack of confidence, and civic disengagement among citizens.

From the perspective of policy development, the communicative practice described above is equally problematic. As stated by Hartt and Warkentin (2017, p. 33), broad community perceptions of shrinkage are significant for the development of public policies, plans, and strategies. Hence, a basic requirement for a shift in policy and planning paradigms (Paddeu, 2017; Schatz, 2017) would be that shrinkage is at least acknowledged by the community as well as by political leaders.

Another communicative practice – in which shrinkage is both acknowledged and addressed as a process with clear political implications – could potentially pave the way towards alternative policies and plans and, at best, towards alternative futures.

## APPENDIX A. SELECTED CASES

*Table 2:*  
*The Selected Cases and Key Selection Criteria (based on: LSN 2015; SCB 2015)*

| Västerbotten County, Sweden          |                    |                      |                    | Göttingen County, Germany |                    |                    |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Municipality                         | A                  | B                    | C                  | D                         | E                  | F                  |
| Population total (1990; rounded)     | 14 200             | 7 700                | 5 400              | 16 600                    | 10 400             | 5 800              |
| Population total (2015; rounded)     | 12 200             | 5 900                | 4 200              | 13 100                    | 8 600              | 4 500              |
| Change (in %; rounded)               | -14                | -23                  | -22                | -22                       | -17                | -21                |
| Number of enclosed localities(range) | 6-10               | 6-10                 | 1-5                | 1-5                       | 6-10               | 1-5                |
| Government formation                 | Two-party majority | Multi-party minority | One-party majority | Multi-party majority      | One-party majority | Two-party majority |

## APPENDIX B. LIST OF INTERVIEWS

Municipality A (2016), 12 April 2016.  
 Municipality A (2017), 9 January 2017.  
 Municipality B (2016), 13 April 2016.  
 Municipality B (2017), 10 January 2017.  
 Municipality C (2016a), 14 April 2016.  
 Municipality C (2016b), 20 October 2016.  
 Municipality D (2016a), 04 May 2016.  
 Municipality D (2016b), 21 September 2016.  
 Municipality E (2016a), 02 May 2016.  
 Municipality E (2016b), 20 September 2016.  
 Municipality F (2016a), 03 May 2016.  
 Municipality F (2016b), 20 September 2016.

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# *Authors' contribution*

| ITEM                       | Josefina Syssner | Conrad Siebert |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Conceptualization          | 60 %             | 40 %           |
| Data curation              | 40 %             | 60 %           |
| Formal analysis            | 0 %              | 100 %          |
| Funding acquisition        | 100 %            | 0 %            |
| Investigation              | 30 %             | 70 %           |
| Methodology                | 50 %             | 50 %           |
| Project administration     | 50 %             | 50 %           |
| Resources                  | 100 %            | 0 %            |
| Software                   | 0 %              | 0 %            |
| Supervision                | 100 %            | 0 %            |
| Validation                 | 0 %              | 0 %            |
| Visualization              | 0 %              | 0 %            |
| Writing – original draft   | 50 %             | 50 %           |
| Writing – review & editing | 100 %            | 0 %            |

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