In the Public Eye
School Inspection Reports in Swedish Newspapers

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Outline of presentation

1. Aim and scope
2. Approach, methodology and sources
3. The Swedish Inspectorate and current media strategies
4. Local newspaper coverage: The general picture
5. Local newspaper coverage: Two selected stories
6. Concluding remarks
Aim and scope (I)

- This paper focuses on the intersection of the media society and audit society, by focusing on local newspaper reporting on school inspection activities.

- In Sweden as well as in the rest of Europe, indicators, benchmarks, statistics and other data connected to measuring performance of education systems are produced at an astonishing speed and length (c.f. Ozga et. al. 2011).

- The media also hold access to these data, and make use of them in their reporting – not the least at the local level

- One important ‘data producer’ in the Swedish context is the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SI) - interacts with the media as it issues press releases for each inspected site, and has as its task to communicate its findings and conclusions to the public.

- Media is not merely a channel for transmitting the data: It is repeatedly interpreted and formatted both by the media and the data producing Agency, with different purposes and consequences.
Aim and scope (II)

Aim

To empirically explore and discuss relations between school inspection activities, Swedish local newspaper coverage and school governance.

The research questions concern how inspection is represented and conveyed in the studied texts and the message sent by scrutinizing what is said and not said, and who get to speak and who are made silent in articles, press releases and inspection reports.

In so doing, we hope to unveil important processes of how public conceptions and representations of inspection are shaped.
Approach (I)

The analysis is theoretically informed by literature on the role and function of the media: a) in the wider ‘audit society’ b) and in the field of education in particular.

We use four metaphorical ideal types to discuss the Media-Inspection Agency relationship: The Inspectorate portrayed by the media as a

- **Watch dog:** informing the public in a transparent and accessible way. Defending and guarding the ‘public’ against poorly functioning public services
- **Mad dog:** attacking in a ruthless way, often a focus on scandals, running the risk to silent a deeper analysis and discussion, hinder democratic dialogue
- **Lap dog:** seeks to legitimate those with power in society, for instance the economic and political elites, leaving little room for criticism and opposition
- **Guide dog:** acting as consultants or critical friends and giving advice (Clarke 2008, drawing on Hackett 2001 and Downe & Martin 2007).
Approach (II)

Sources

• Newspaper articles retrieved from a Swedish media storage database, 2003-2010
• Press releases from the Inspectorate
• Written inspection reports
• Transcribed interviews with high-ranking Inspectorate Officers on media relations and the purpose of communicating with media

The analysis is undertaken on materials that represent different meaning/s and agenda/s. Acknowledging these attempts to represent ‘reality’ aids extends our understanding
## Approach (II)

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<th>Few remarks</th>
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<tr>
<td>City South M1</td>
<td>Few remarks (Mun. grouping A)</td>
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<td>City East M3</td>
<td>Many remarks (Mun. grouping A)</td>
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<td>Rural West M2</td>
<td>Many remarks (Mun. grouping B)</td>
<td>S5</td>
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<td>Rural East M4</td>
<td>Few remarks (Mun. grouping B)</td>
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The Swedish Inspectorate (SI)

- 2003: Inspection reinstalled (NAE)
- 2008: A new agency; The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (SI). Tougher inspection, focusing on deviations.
- Current formats of inspection:
  - a) regular supervisions of all schools and municipalities
  - b) quality assessments where a particular topic or school subject is assessed in a sample of schools
  - c) complaints from students and/or parents or others.

Additional tasks: Approve independent schools
Current media strategies (I)

- A “very deliberate media strategy” (Officer V)

- “Clarity, accessibility and credibility” (Officer I)

- “Part of it has to do with transparency, in a democracy. To review how public resources are used. And then it is about contributing to a discussion about Swedish education, to show results and outcomes in an accessible form to parents, students and all others interested” (Officer III)

- [d]ifferent media, that is radio, tv and newspapers, have lined up to receive these press releases and shown a great interest in our conclusions. And that of course has to do with education being such a hot topic in Sweden (Officer III).
Current media strategies (II)

• “[t]he press is important and I have experienced an obstructive municipality where we wrote a press-release. And it was not until then that they bended down” (Officer I)

• “The press is probably our most powerful sanction” (Officer 1)

• “[w]e are in the process re-constructing Swedish education” (Officer III)
## Local newspaper coverage 2003-2010: An Overview

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<th>City East</th>
<th>City South</th>
<th>Rural South</th>
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<tr>
<td>30 articles</td>
<td>20 articles</td>
<td>20 articles</td>
<td>8 articles</td>
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<td>Watch dog: reports on several individual filed complaints, approving independent schools governing the public-independent school relationships</td>
<td>Watch dog: reports on critical inspections, Sis governing of the public-independent relationship</td>
<td>Watch dog: reports on several individual filed complaints, reports on critical inspections</td>
<td>Watch dog: reports on individual filed complaints, transmitter of hope and trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favoring national officers, voice occasionally given to stakeholders (foremost local officials and politicians)</td>
<td>Lap dog: legitimating privatisation</td>
<td>Mad dog: obstructing constructive and democratic deliberation</td>
<td>Guide dog: reporting on the municipality as a good example nationally</td>
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<td>Guide dog:Promoting summer schools</td>
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<td>&quot;Lame watch dog&quot;: Incapable and expensive</td>
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Local newspaper coverage: 
Selected stories (I)

Travelling stories as a form of governing in secular Sweden: The story of ‘When the NAE kicked God out’

-The story: If Christian preparation for confirmation should be allowed as an optional subject or not at a particular public school
-(Intimidating) watch dog: the school “will be rigorously scrutinized* soon” (NAE Officer cited in the local paper)
-But sanctions are lacking: “Formally we can not prohibit this, but we deliver criticism and we expect the municipality to adhere to it” (NAE Officer cited in the local paper)
-Relates to the conceptual construction of persuasion as governance, where preferences are changed without formal-legal coerce (Bell et al 2010).
-The watch dog ‘sees’ schools and municipalities and keep a close eye, even at a distance.

* [in Swedish skärskådade, quite a strong expression]
Local newspaper coverage: Selected stories (II)

Democratic communication or media scandal: The story of ‘The day SI chose to communicate directly’

• Sis polemical article: “The Swedish Schools Inspectorate level criticism against [Rural south]”. The promise: “[We] will not retain our hold on [Rural south] until the deficits we have identified are taken care of”
• Rural south response: SI has no mission to “rouse public opinion or create debates against individual municipalities”. Why no previous dialogue or notice?
• SI-director general response: SI “is a new Agency and our communication with schools and the world around has still not found its form…”
• Local newspaper follow up:
  1. Day one. Summary of the inspection report and the 27 points of criticism. Statements from inspectors (“this was an unusually poor result”) and responsible civil servants (“we take this very seriously”).
  2. Day two. On sight story from a local school (“it is the day after SI: s public and leaden criticism”). Disparate statements from students and one disillusioned teacher (“we are struggling on in every possible way”).

• SI as a watch dog guarding against poor quality, catalyst of local school improvement.
• SI as mad dog: obstructing constructive and democratic deliberation.
Concluding remarks (I)

- The media plays an important role when it comes to understanding inspection as form of a political governing tool, with the potential of shaping public perceptions of inspection and education and its role and function in the wider society.

- Media reports on actions performed or commented by the Inspectorate are likely to contribute to shaping the public view of schooling.

- In a situation where the relation between citizens and the school has become a customer-client relationship the increasing media attention may have an impact on school choices and hence on the economy of individual schools.

- These media reports might affect public conceptions about school quality and how school quality may be enhanced and what citizens/consumers might call for when it comes to their individual rights to education.
Concluding remarks (II)

- The public-private dimension, in the form of public and independent schools is receiving a lot of media attention. The watch dog and the guide dog provide educational consumers with information for them to act on and base their choices.

- Media both contributes to and reinforces to construct the image of the educational consumer and the need for transparent, supposedly objective information. The current format of the Inspectorate’s succinct reporting only on deviations is one example, linking well with a favored format of the media.

- A converged form of packaging and selling information would make the mediation and translation quite smooth, inasmuch as the media will have even less work with re-processing data delivered by the Inspectorate prior to publication.
Concluding remarks (III)

• The Inspectorate as a public service appears to be untouchable form for check-up and there is no visible distrust towards this state agency or their activities.

• Compared to the situation in many other countries: In England, Ofsted have been subject for bad media attention and are struggling with their reputation.

• In this study we can not find much watch dogging of the inspectorate: The NAE and later SI has predominantly been the untouchable watch dogs, legitimate public institutions acting on behalf of and protecting (a certain perception of) the common good.
Thanks for listening!

We acknowledge support from The Swedish research Council for financing the projects

- **Swedish national school inspections: Introducing centralised instruments for governing in a decentralised context** (no 2007-3579, Rönnberg)
- **Governing by Inspection** (no 2009-5770, Segerholm, Nilsson, Hult, Lindgren, Rönnberg), financed by the Swedish Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in the UK. The team from Scotland and England by Prof. Jenny Ozga, University of Oxford.

We also acknowledge Umeå University for financing the project

- **Inspecting the ‘Market’: Education at the Intersection of Marketisation and Central State Control** (no 223-514-09, Rönnberg, Lindgren)