

The Risks of Hybrid Organisations

Expectations and Evidence

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1. Introduction

Hybrid organisations mix the characteristics of state, market and civil society and cannot easily be classified in terms of these categories (Brandsen, Van de Donk & Putters, 2005). Their growth has been spurred by political trends and fashions like the privatisation, decentralisation and deregulation of public services. Primarily on the basis of theoretical assumptions, several commentators have pointed to risks of these developments. They have argued that hybridisation will not only result in worse organisational performance, but also affect government's capacity to correct it. Yet our evidence shows that many of these expectations remain unfulfilled. In some cases, this is because they are based on dubious theoretical assumptions.

We will develop our argument in three steps. First, we will *clarify the definition of hybrid organisations*. Although there is a growing wealth of literature on hybrid organisations in various disciplines, the debate about these phenomena has proven to be somewhat confusing. There is a big heterogeneity of forms and definitions, which also differ in various disciplines (cf. Rainey, 1997; Koppell, 2002, Skelcher, 2005). Next, we will identify *potential risks and opportunities* associated with this type of organisation. There are several suppositions about beneficial and harmful effects, but only some are substantiated by empirical research. Finally, on this basis, we will identify *future directions* for research on hybrid organisations.

In this paper, we will bring together the main findings from Dutch research from the mid-1990s until the present. These are based on a variety of projects conducted by Radboud University Nijmegen, Tilburg University and the Netherlands School for Public Administration over the last few years.

2. Background: definition and context

2.1. Definitions of hybrid organisations

The debate on hybrid organisations in public administration research has been marred by terminological confusion¹. All definitions agree that hybridity refers to some sort of mix. Yet, confusingly, they tend to differ both in terms of basic dimensions and the variation on those dimensions. The common dimensions used are the categories of public and private; state, market and civil society; and coordination mechanisms such as markets and hierarchies.

The *grand dichotomy* of ‘public’ versus ‘private’ can be read in a number of ways (Weintraub et.al., 1997). In the field of public administration, it has often been understood as the distinction between state and market. When translated to organisations, the distinction becomes one of allegedly different characteristics of public organisations as compared to those of their private counterparts (see Rainey, 1997: 73-74). In the Dutch discussion about hybridity, public organisations have been described as so-called ‘task organisations’, whereas private organisations are labelled ‘market organisations’ (Simon, 1989).

Table 1: Two ideal-types of organisation (based on Simon, 1989)

Task organization	Market organization
An organisation which is totally dependant on a (political) principal for its strategy. This principal also determines the organisation’s output and who it should be addressed at.	A totally independent organisation with no principal but various customers.
The organisation is in a vertical steering relation with this principal and receives its tasks and funding exclusively from him.	The organisation is free to determine its own output and who to address it to.
	The organisation has to take care of its funding itself, which is generated at the market place.

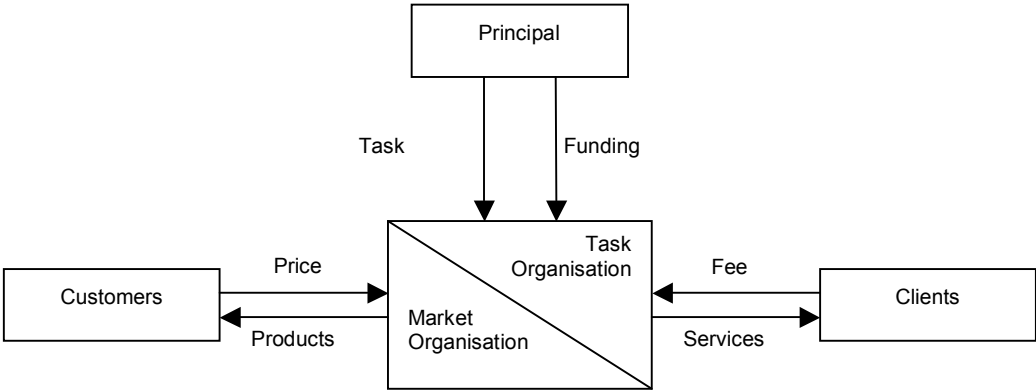
Both types of organisations are said to differ fundamentally when it comes to their cultures. ‘Task organizations’ are driven (to use the terms introduced by Jacobs, 1994) by a *guardian syndrome*, whereas ‘market organizations’ are driven by a *commercial syndrome*. The first culture is associated with values such as discipline, hierarchy, loyalty but also fatalism, whereas the latter culture is linked to values such as competition, initiative, entrepreneurship, efficiency and productivity.

¹ Please note that we shall wilfully ignore the wide variety of literature elsewhere, such as organisational theory and institutional economics. This is not for lack of respect, but lack of space. Our focus here is only on interpretations of hybridity current in public administration research.

Hybrid organisations are, in this definition, a mix of the characteristics of public and of private sector organisations. They simultaneously are ‘task-‘ as well as ‘market organisations’ and have to combine the values of the guardian as well as those of the commercial syndrome.

A prototypical hybrid organisation would look like this:

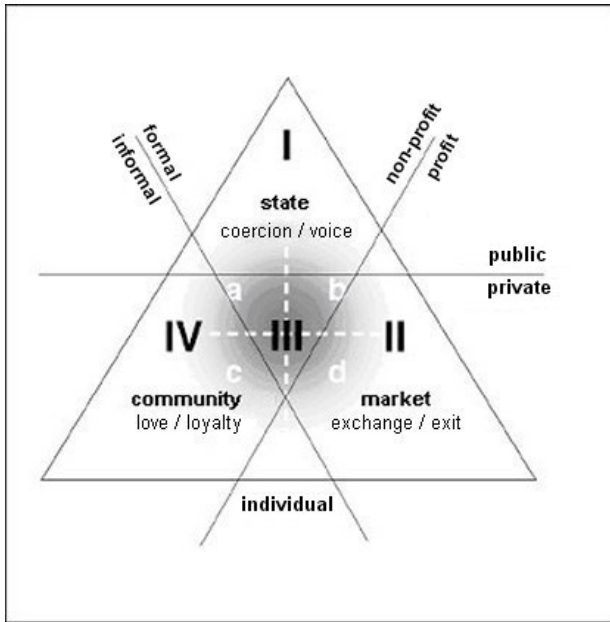
Figure 1: A prototypical hybrid organisation (based on Mouwen & Van Bijsterveldt, 2000: 51)



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 the Tilburg school (Van de Donk, 2001; Brandsen et.al., 2005). This added a third domain of ‘community’ (elsewhere also referred to as ‘civil society’), with hybrids occupying the centre ground². Next to public vs. private, the dimensions of formal vs. informal and profit vs. 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.

² 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 2: 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 contributes 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.

2.2. *The rise of hybrid organisations in The Netherlands*³

In the Dutch context, hybrid organisations are a well-known phenomenon, but their number has risen significantly in recent decades. Since the early 20th century, the private non-profit sector has been the main provider of services that in many other countries were seen to be responsibilities of the state (e.g. schooling, social housing, health care). This was part of a major political trade-off, which allowed various religious and political groups the right to establish their own service providers with public funding, creating a society divided into various ‘pillars’ (Lijphart, 1968). These pillars have by now largely disintegrated, but their

³ See Karré’s forthcoming dissertation for a short history of hybrid organizations in The Netherlands.

institutional legacy was a welfare system in which private non-profits were dominant, albeit under a state-dominated regime.

This changed during the early 1980s when The Netherlands were perceived to be the ‘sick man of Europe’ and drastic steps were seen as unavoidable to reform the welfare state, to enhance the legitimacy of the state and to solve its pressing financial problems. Two major steps were taken, based on a *New Public Management* philosophy (based on Karré, 2006: 60):

- Privatisation and contracting out of tasks due to governments shifting from providing to ensuring service provision;
- The introduction of market-type mechanisms in public service provision;

As a result, many of the private non-profit organisations delivering public services were expected to compete for funding. In addition, a number of public agencies (e.g. in waste management) were decentralised or privatised. Efforts were made to create new markets where none before had existed, or to increase the level of competition where they did (Brandsen, 2004). Although many markets did not function as expected, the whole set of operations did have the effect of creating an ever larger group of organisations that defied easy classification and, as such, created regulatory ambiguity. In other words, more organisations could be classified as hybrids.

As a consequence, the late 1990s witnessed a fierce discussion about hybrid organisations. It started with reports by the Dutch National Court of Audit that signalled a thicket of such organisations and the inability of the state to control them. Some years later, a government committee, installed after private companies claimed that hybrids destroy the level-playing field, even proposed banning hybrid organisational forms by law⁴ (Cohen Committee, 1997). Other critics were Simon (1989), Verhoef & Simon (2001) and more recently Gradus (2005). According to them hybridity poses great risks for both the quality of public services provided by hybrid organisations as well their organisation’s structural and cultural integrity.

At the same time, a small but vocal group of academics, among them most prominently In ‘t Veld (1995, 1997, 2001, 2005) argued in favour of a more positive view of hybrid organisations, focussing on the possible synergetic effects due to hybridity. In later years two

⁴ This law (called *Wet Markt en Overheid*, or Law on Markets and the State, was drafted but was finally retracted after fierce criticism and a change in political fashion.

influential Dutch institutions, the *Scientific Council for Governmental Policy* (WRR, 2004), a government think-tank, and the *Socio-Economic Council* (SER, 2005), a meeting place of Dutch social partners, embraced this more positive view, arguing that dividing our world into two mutually exclusive domains might work well in theory but that such a view has its limitations when looking at social reality. Hybridity, they argued, is no extraordinary or perverse form. On the contrary, all organisations are more or less hybrid (to paraphrase Bozeman's famous saying that all organisations are public; Bozeman, 1987).

3. The potential effects of hybridisation

The greatest fear of the political principals of hybrid organisations seems to be that they will lose their grip on them due to their increased autonomy in management matters and policy implementation. Such a lack of control is perceived to be especially problematic in times that hybrid organisations neglect their public tasks and focus only on their commercial activities. Whether this fear is founded is hard to say, though, as it is rarely clear what constitutes a 'sufficient' level of political control. This echoes more general discussions following the implementation of *New Public Management* principles. Since the issue is so slippery, we will here focus on aspects of performance that may conceivably call for increased political control. These mainly revolve around two issues: financial risks and opportunities and conflicts of interests and value-orientations.

3.1 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 that they by doing so could gain an unfair advantage over their private competitors. An example of this, is the use of a publicly funded overhead (accommodation, administrative staff) for commercial activities, with the effect of both distorting markets and of creating an implicit overcapacity at the taxpayer's expense. In addition, money could be wasted through risky ventures resulting in high losses for the public purse.

Yet others have argued that by being engaged in commercial activities, hybrid organisations could create extra revenues supporting their public services. For instance, the profits from luxury services to wealthy clients might be used to reduce rates for services to clients with limited means, thereby reducing the demand on public funds or allowing higher quality levels

without additional cost to the taxpayer. This more positive point of view is based on the idea that there are more direct ways than taxes to channel revenues from markets towards the public sector.

3.2 Conflicts of interests and value orientations

The second issue is based on the idea that public and private organisations serve different interests (the public interest vs. the organisation's self-interest) and that they are driven by different sets of conflicting values. Critics claim 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 these dichotomous thinkers argue that public and private interests and values should be strictly separated. According to Simon (1989, 2005), hybridity will sooner or later lead to internal and external problems, such as unclear loyalties, clashing cultures and financial problems. Jacobs (1994) warns against the creation of 'monstrous moral hybrids' and uses the mafia as an example. And Koppel (2003) claims in his study on *Freddie Mac* and *Fanny Mae*, now world famous because of their problems with the 'credit crunch' that hybridity diminishes government's ability to effectively steer such organisations of vital societal importance.

This type of argument quickly runs into problems, since it is not easy to clearly 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? However, this is such a highly problematic issue that we can not attempt to resolve here.⁵

A more relevant issue is whether and how members of organisations perceive these theoretical tensions between different interests and values as these could potentially translate into a clash between different cultures of service provision. For instance, decision-making over the treatment of individual patients may be torn between the desire to offer any possible treatment

⁵ 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.

and the wish to keep costs in check. In theory, tensions such as these could be a major stress factor to staff and could ultimately even destabilise an organisation.

Proponents of hybridity have, by contrast, argued that the tensions between conflicting or competing interests and values could lead to the creation of 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.

3.3 Methodology

The research on which our ensuing analysis is based was conducted at the Universities of Tilburg and Nijmegen, at the Netherlands School for Public Administration⁶. 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 then Tilburg- based research network on hybrid organisations and subsequently published together in 2006, 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 (Brandsen, 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 PhD-research by one of us on hybrid waste management organisations (Karré, forthcoming) 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.

⁶ See www.hybridorganisations.com for more information.

4. The empirical findings

4.1 Financial risks and opportunities

As noted, many commentators expect that there is the risk of public funds leaking into commercial ventures. Indeed, this has been the charge most frequently heard in the political arena. Yet the evidence does not support such claims. When the Dutch National Court of Audit (2005) looked into this matter, it came to ambiguous conclusions. On the one hand, the organisations it investigated (a research institute, a hospital and an institute for vocational organisation) had only to some extent established regular procedures to deal with commercial activities, leading to uncertainty over issues such as price calculation and the assignment of staff. Clearly, it took time to integrate new types of initiatives into organisational routines. On the other hand, over time all organisations involved had established effective administrative barriers between different sources of funding, thus lowering the risk of money ‘leaking’. Their budgets were transparent, or at least no less transparent than they had been previously. This is generally supported by other casework.

In certain policy fields there were incidents of financial mismanagement, where money was squandered in risky initiatives. For example, some social landlords and universities got into deep trouble over unwise investments in real estate. Yet there was no ostensible growth in incidents of financial malpractice due to hybridisation as compared to previous periods 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.

4.2 Conflicts of interests and value orientations

It has been reasoned that, since hybridisation leads to organisations being forced to satisfy an increasing number of conflicting demands, they may degrade 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. 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. 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.

The immediate effect has been to spur a remarkable 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).

At the ‘street level’, the evidence shows a different picture. Critics painted 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, but it had little to do with cultural conflict.

This difference appears to be caused by how the dimensions of hybridity are related to the direct experience of culture. Hybridity, as we have defined it, is based on the categories through which public administration orders the world. They are confronted with formalised differences between public and private sources of funding, as well as different types of regulations and policies. This makes hybridity quite real. When such dimensions are blurred within organisations, they no longer make sense to staff members. That does not necessarily make the concept redundant, but it does raise fundamental issues about how it can be used.

5. The end of hybridity?

A number of authors predicted that hybrid organisations pose unacceptable risks to the provision of public services. However, the available evidence suggests that these risks have been overstated. Case study research in The Netherlands 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). Timely regulation of administrative practice may have prevented any problems from occurring. 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.

These results question whether certain theoretical expectations were correct. These supposed a direct link between formal aspects of organisations (esp. structure and funding) and behaviour, which appears to exist only where those formal aspects had a direct bearing on the experiences of staff members. This was mostly at the interface between management and politics; less so at lower levels of the organisations. It shows that hybridisation is to some extent only a theoretical construction that does not connect to the life world of many of the people to which it is applied. That is of course often the case with theory, but it is problematic if theoretically supposed tensions are expected to be recognised in real life and to be used as part of the normative template for decision-making within organisations. It is clear from the evidence that this cannot be assumed *a priori*.

However, the concept of hybridity has proved useful in two ways. First, it has given focus and a new angle to the research on a class of organisations about which public administration research had had little to say. In the process, it has effectively questioned dichotomous perceptions of society and flawed theoretical notions connected to the dichotomy. Second, it has generated significant insights into the dilemmas of strategic decision-making in the public services and of devising governance arrangements (e.g. supervision) to deal with the effects of those decisions. As such, it has helped to better understand the development of the governance and management of those services.

At the same time, the evidence also demonstrates that the concept is hitting its limits. Its function as a 'battering ram' against old-fashioned notions of state and market is becoming less important, as those notions are increasingly losing credibility in public administration research. It heralds a new phase in research on hybrid organisations. One result of the work of past years is that such organisations are increasingly in the picture and will be the more so. This has helped to make public administration research somewhat less focused on the state, moving away from the restrictive Wilsonian interpretation of public administration. Yet as research on hybrid organisations grows, the significance of hybridity as a concept is waning. As a tool for analysing organisational behaviour, it has been proven to yield interesting results when applied to decision-making at a certain level of analysis in a certain context. It will continue to do so, but its value is more circumscribed than we had previously believed.

Future research on the topic is therefore likely to draw on other types of concepts, bringing it more in line with other traditions in public administration research. For instance, one of the major outcomes of recent research is that it encourages interorganisational collaboration. Here

there is an obvious link with work currently conducted elsewhere on public service networks. One of the key questions for future research is therefore whether hybridisation is a step towards the creation of new organisational arrangements, key innovations not just in output, but in the structure of provision itself.

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