



# How to Manage Organizational Reputation when Under Attack: Learnings from the Child and Adult Protection Authorities

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RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

What does the reputation management of a public authority look like under extreme conditions? The present article studies the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Authorities (CAPA), which experienced a major reputational crisis after a mother killed her two children in 2015 and accused the CAPA of bearing responsibility. We use the CAPA as one of the most contested public organizations in Switzerland to study reputation management when a public authority is under severe attack and draw learnings for public organizations in similar situations in the future. Applying the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) in a content analysis to newspaper articles from the German-speaking part of Switzerland, we examine narratives uttered by CAPA representatives. Furthermore, by comparing the CAPA's communication with a similar case in the Romandie, we draw general lessons for public organizations that want to improve their reputation management and crisis communication. The results show how in German-speaking Switzerland, negative media reports increased sharply and caused lasting damage to the CAPA's reputation. By contrast, the scandal in French-speaking Switzerland did not lead to a full-blown crisis. Our findings underscore the need for public organizations to speak up when under attack, to build up the respective communication skills and resources and to employ positive narratives with shiny hero characters rather than negative narratives emphasizing villains.

## ABSTRAKT

Wie sieht das Reputationsmanagement einer Behörde unter Extrembedingungen aus? Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht die schweizerischen Kindes- und Erwachsenenschutzbehörden (KESB), die eine schwere Reputationskrise erlebten, nachdem eine Mutter im Jahr 2015 ihre beiden Kinder getötet und die KESB beschuldigt hatte, dafür verantwortlich zu sein. Wir verwenden die KESB als eine der am stärksten umstrittenen öffentlichen Organisationen in der Schweiz, um zu untersuchen, wie Reputationsmanagement aussieht, wenn eine öffentliche Behörde massiv angegriffen wird, und um Lehren für öffentliche Organisationen in der Zukunft zu ziehen, wenn sie sich in ähnlichen Situationen wiederfinden. Wir untersuchen Narrative von KESB-

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Vertreter\*innen, die in grossen deutschsprachigen Schweizer Zeitungen erschienen sind. Darüber hinaus vergleichen wir die Kommunikation der KESB mit einem ähnlichen Fall in der Romandie und ziehen daraus allgemeine Lehren für öffentliche Organisationen, die ihr Reputationsmanagement und ihre Krisenkommunikation verbessern wollen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie in der Deutschschweiz die negative Medienberichterstattung ausser Kontrolle geriet und den Ruf der KESB nachhaltig schädigte. Im Gegensatz dazu führte der Skandal in der Westschweiz nicht zu einer ernsthaften Krise. Unsere Ergebnisse unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit für öffentliche Organisationen, sich zu äussern, wenn sie angegriffen werden, die entsprechenden Kommunikationsfähigkeiten und -ressourcen aufzubauen und positive Narrative mit glänzenden Heldenfiguren anstelle von negativen Narrativen mit Bösewichten zu verbreiten.

## ABSTRAITE

À quoi ressemble la gestion de la réputation d'une autorité publique dans des conditions extrêmes ? Cet article analyse les services de protection de la jeunesse (SPJ) suisses, qui ont connu une crise de réputation majeure après qu'une mère ait tué ses deux enfants en 2015 et accusé la SPJ d'en porter la responsabilité. Nous utilisons la SPJ comme l'une des organisations publiques les plus contestées en Suisse pour étudier la gestion de la réputation lorsqu'une autorité publique est sévèrement attaquée et pour en tirer des leçons pour les organisations publiques dans des situations similaires à l'avenir. Nous examinons les narratifs des représentants de la SPJ qui ont été publiés dans les principaux journaux suisses germanophones. En outre, en comparant la communication de la SPJ avec un cas similaire en Romandie, nous tirons des leçons générales pour les organisations publiques qui veulent améliorer leur gestion de la réputation et leur communication de crise. Les résultats montrent comment, en Suisse alémanique, les rapports négatifs des médias ont échappé à tout contrôle et ont causé des dommages durables à la réputation de la SPJ. En revanche, le scandale en Suisse romande n'a pas débouché sur une véritable crise. Nos résultats soulignent la nécessité pour les organisations publiques de s'exprimer lorsqu'elles sont attaquées, de renforcer leurs compétences et leurs ressources en matière de communication et d'utiliser des narratifs positifs avec des héros brillants plutôt que des narratifs négatifs présentant des méchants.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

What does the reputation management of a public organization look like when it is in the public spotlight and subject to a media firestorm? The present article uses the case of the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Authorities, one of the most contested public organizations in Switzerland, to study reputation management when a public authority is under severe attack and draw learnings for public organizations in similar situations in the future.

The study of organizational reputation has become increasingly popular in political and administrative sciences over the last decades. Reputation is commonly defined as follows: “organizational reputation [is] a set of beliefs about an organization’s capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences” (Carpenter & Krause 2012, p. 26). Crises are especially dangerous for an organization’s reputation, and numerous studies show that communication is key in such circumstances (Boin et al. 2017; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020; Olsson, 2014). Therefore, we investigate a public organization’s communication in times of crisis. Our case is the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Authorities (CAPA; in German known as “Kindes- und Erwachsenenschutzbehörden (KESB)). The CAPA, which have been in operation since 2013 after an extensive policy change process (see Hildbrand et al. 2020 and Stauffer 2022a), have gained the reputation of being the “most hated authority” in the German-speaking part of Switzerland within a very short period of time (Dorer 2017; all citations are authors’ translations). The so-called “Flaach case,” in which a mother suffocated her two children and subsequently accused the responsible CAPA of having

driven her to despair, triggered a wave of nationwide outrage that provoked numerous insults and even death threats against CAPA employees. The CAPA were relatively unprepared for this event due to a combination of factors such as federal organization, lack of public relations training, and a high caseload with low human resources. Consequently, they did not succeed in averting the negative development of their reputation. Based on a media dataset with a total of 232 articles from the year following the Flaach case, we examine the communication of the CAPA authorities in this paper. The focus on narratives allows us to classify and evaluate the statements of the CAPA authorities. A comparison with a similar case from French-speaking Switzerland, which became known under the catchword “Rapport Rouiller”, allows us to draw additional lessons regarding the adequate communicative reaction to such media scandals. We examine narratives by CAPA representatives that appeared in major German- and French-speaking Swiss newspaper outlets. Expert interviews complement the database. Our findings underscore the need for public organizations to speak up when under attack, to build up the respective communication skills and resources and to employ positive narratives with shiny hero characters rather than negative narratives emphasizing villains.

In the next section, we shortly discuss the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) as our analytical take on reputation management before we present our two cases of reputational crisis. After introducing our research design, we present the findings from the two case studies and compare them subsequently to draw learnings for other public organizations in future reputational crises.

## 2 PUBLIC REPUTATION MANAGEMENT AND POLICY NARRATIVES

Reputation is increasingly important in our society. We not only rely on a person's reputation when we interact with them (Goffman 1956). Reputation is also key for our assessment of groups, organizations, or institutions (Carpenter 2010). Early in the new millennium, the World Economic Forum stated that “corporate brand reputation outranks financial performance as the most important measure of corporate success” (Power 2007, p. 129). In modern information society where a multitude of opinions are available, organizations need to cultivate their reputation. The strong growth of the public relations industry and the countless guides on reputation management are testimonial to this statement.

Reputation is also important for public organizations. Like any other employer, a public organization relies on a good reputation to find motivated and qualified employees (Alon-Barkat & Gilad 2016; Busuioc & Lodge 2016). In addition, the reputation of a public organization directly impacts the autonomy of this organization. Because it is subject to political scrutiny, an organization's good reputation helps keep political patrons in check: The organization is trusted to do what it is meant to do. In contrast, a bad reputation can provoke interventions in an organization's process, as a bad reputation also impairs the reputation of its political principals (Hinterleitner & Sager 2019). In the worst case, principals may even feel compelled to close an organization whose reputation has deteriorated too much (Carpenter 2010).

Public organizations try to influence their reputation in various ways, a practice that is labelled “reputation management” (Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012 p. 190). A key instrument of reputation management is communication (Gilad et al. 2015). Targeting either specific stakeholders or the general public, a public organization explains its mission and activities, trying to portray itself in positive ways.

To capture the characteristics of reputational communication in the public realm, we analyze narratives (Kuenzler 2021; Schlauffer et al. 2022). Narratives are stories we tell each other in our everyday lives. Transcending classic fairytales for children, the term narratives also captures stories exchanged between adults about work, the environment, politics, and other areas of interest. Narratives are a central tool of human communication as they are more easily memorized than bare information and thus are especially suited to convince others of one's opinion (Berinsky & Kinder 2006; Jones & Song 2014). The analysis of narratives touches upon central messages conveyed in human communication.

We conceptualize and measure narratives by means of the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF), a young theory of the policy process building on the cognitive psychology insights introduced above (Shanahan et al. 2017; Stauffer & Kuenzler 2021). According to the NPF, we are all *homines narrantes*, i.e., storytelling humans (Shanahan et al. 2017, p. 179). In consequence,

narratives matter also in public policy and public administration (Nowell & Albrecht 2019, pp. 359–360; Shanahan et al. 2017, p. 179). The NPF posits that narratives feature a limited number of unified structural elements that can be identified across different contexts (Shanahan et al. 2017, p. 175). Crucially, narratives feature narrative characters such as heroes, villains, or victims. While a villain is seen as causing a problem, a victim suffers from said problem, and a hero solves it (Shanahan et al. 2017, p. 176). A person constructing a narrative will make strategic choices about who to cast as hero, villain, or victim, depending on the message to be transmitted (Shanahan et al. 2017, pp. 176–178).

### 3 THE TWO CASES OF REPUTATIONAL CRISIS

Our analysis focuses on the Swiss Child and Adult Protection Authorities (CAPA). The CAPA are responsible for implementing the Child and Adult Protection Law (CAPL), which is to support individuals who are unable to assume their own rights. Specifically, the CAPA are to help children who find themselves in abusive family constellations, mentally disabled persons who require assistance to organize their daily lives, or elderly people with dementia. The CAPA were installed in 2013 following a national policy reform. While in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, the reform instigated organizational change from local lay authorities to regional professional authorities, the French-speaking part of Switzerland was only marginally affected, with courts being responsible for the implementation of the CAPL.

In the following, we examine communication from the CAPA in two instances of reputational crisis. The main case of our analysis is a crisis that occurred in the German-speaking part of Switzerland in January 2015. On New Year's Day, a mother suffocated her two children aged two and five in Flaach, a village near the city of Zurich. The family had been in contact with the regional CAPA, as the parents were under investigation of fraud. The children were put into a children's home for the duration of the legal trial. While they had been allowed to spend the Christmas holidays at home with their mother, they were to return to the home in January. After killing their children and unsuccessfully trying to commit suicide, the mother publicly accused the CAPA of being responsible for this tragedy. She claimed that the CAPA had harassed her, leaving her no choice but to commit the double infanticide. Although independent investigations would later show that these allegations were baseless and that the mother suffered from a severe psychosis, at the time of the infanticide these reproaches triggered massive public attention and negative reactions towards the CAPA.

As a comparative case, we investigate a reputational crisis that occurred in the French-speaking part of Switzerland in March 2018. A father was sentenced to 18 years in prison for sexually abusing his eight children during more than ten years. The mother, accused of complicity, was sentenced to three years in prison, with a partial suspension. Apart from the feeling of horror at the acts committed, the most explosive part of the story was that the family had been accompanied for years by the CAPA (and a few other local social services). To answer the question of how such a crime could have gone unnoticed over all these years, the cantonal government commissioned a former federal judge (Claude Rouiller) to conduct a comprehensive investigation. His 184-page report, known as the "Rapport Rouiller," (Rouiller 2018) was presented in September 2018. It severely blamed the CAPA for exposing the children to this crime for years. For instance, the report stated that "[t]he organizational defects of the [CAPA] are serious and the causal link between these defects and the misfortune of the children X is indisputable" (Keystone SDA 2018).

The two cases examined in this article constitute interesting venues for drawing lessons regarding adequate communication in times of reputational crisis. While the cases share several similarities, such as the overarching CAPL policy and the Swiss context, they should not be thought of as most similar cases. The implementation structures of the CAPL vary in the German- and the French-speaking part of Switzerland, the sequence of independent investigation and media attention differs, and, as we will illustrate in the findings section, the authorities introduced structural adaptations as an answer to the case in the French-speaking part of Switzerland. Thus, the case selection does not allow for general assertions regarding the causality of communication and intensity of reputational crisis. In the next section, we present our empirical research design.

Table 1 provides an overview of our data. Based on the reporting of the 6 newspapers with the largest circulation in German- and French-speaking Switzerland, we examine the CAPA's communication after the two incidents just described. The period of investigation is chosen in each case to cover the period from the first day of reporting until the substantial decline in the number of articles published. The data were retrieved from the newspaper database Factiva and analyzed based on a standard NPF codebook (cf. Appendix 1). This led to a total of 232 analyzed German-speaking articles reporting on the «Flaach case» (with 329 identified narratives; cf. Kuenzler & Stauffer 2021) and 12 French-speaking articles reporting on the «Rapport Rouiller case» (with 25 narratives). Because of the obvious imbalance and the distinctly stronger data basis of the first case, it represents the core of this analysis. Nevertheless, relevant results and conclusions can be drawn from the data of the second case in qualitative and comparative terms. Furthermore, we complement the data from the second case with two semi-structured expert interviews (cf. Appendix 2).

	GERMAN-SPEAKING	FRENCH-SPEAKING
Data source	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ, <a href="https://www.nzz.ch/">https://www.nzz.ch/</a>)</li> <li>– Tagesanzeiger (TA, <a href="https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/">https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/</a>)</li> <li>– Blick (<a href="https://www.blick.ch/">https://www.blick.ch/</a>)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Le Temps (<a href="https://www.letemps.ch/">https://www.letemps.ch/</a>)</li> <li>– 24 Heures (<a href="https://www.24heures.ch/">https://www.24heures.ch/</a>)</li> <li>– Le Matin (<a href="https://www.lematin.ch/">https://www.lematin.ch/</a>)</li> </ul>
Investigation period	01.–08.2015	03.2018–09.2019
Search terms	«erwachsenenschutz* or kindesschutz* or kesb»	«Rapport Rouiller»
No. of articles	232	12
No. of narratives	329	25

Table 1 Overview of data.

With this approach, we do not analyze the CAPA's own communication, but only what was presented in the media. The reason for this is that we are interested in what actually had a broad public impact. Debates around CAPA otherwise often take place in rather closed expert circles (Hildbrand et al. 2020). This communication has no impact on reputation. What is written in the biggest newspapers in Switzerland, by contrast, does.

We present our findings from the two cases in the next section.

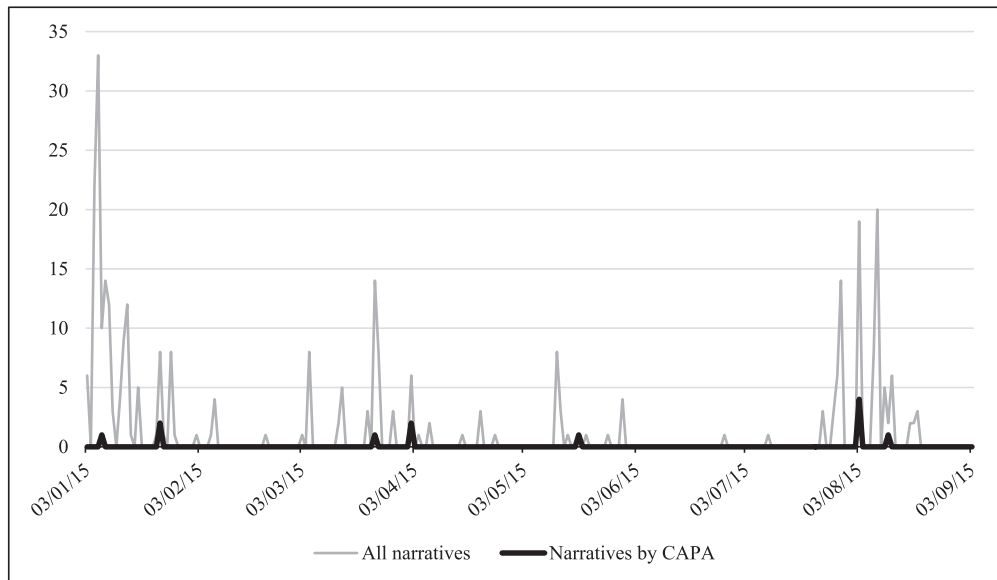
## 5 FINDINGS

In the following, we present the analyses of the two cases consecutively before providing a comparative discussion in the next section.

### 5.1 THE CAPA'S COMMUNICATION AFTER THE DOUBLE INFANTICIDE IN FLAACH

Figure 1 displays the frequency of narratives in the dataset in the eight months following the double infanticide in Flaach. The grey line, which depicts narratives found in the dataset concerning the topic of child and adult protection by all speakers, illustrates the intensity of the public debate. While there were times of relative “quiet” in the eight months after the double infanticide, the debate sparked time and again with renewed vehemence. The characteristics of this debate have been broadly illustrated (Kuenzler 2021; Kuenzler & Stauffer 2022). Suffice it to say here that a great majority of narratives feature the CAPA as a villain, indicating the severity of the reputational crisis for the CAPA. The following citation serves as an example of the reputational attacks:

*[A famous writer] considers the CAPA to be thoughtless, highly dangerous, and incompetent. The 40-year-old writer is convinced that the children would still be alive had they not been separated from the mother. She demands the immediate disempowerment of the CAPA, since otherwise, more tragedies might occur.*  
(Tagesanzeiger 06/01/2015)



**Figure 1** Frequency of narratives in newspaper articles eight months after double infanticide in Flaach.

The black line in [Figure 1](#) depicts narratives in the dataset that are delivered by CAPA speakers. Strikingly, the number of these narratives is very low, with a total of 12 as opposed to a total of 396 narratives in the entire dataset. Hence, narratives by CAPA speakers amount to merely 3.03%. The narratives by CAPA speakers are distributed over time, often simultaneously with or following a general spike of narratives on the topic of child and adult protection.

[Table 2](#) provides an overview of the 12 narratives by CAPA speakers. The narratives are spread across all three newspaper sources, with the Tagesanzeiger featuring 50% of all CAPA speaker narratives. Different speakers deliver the narratives. While the majority of speakers are CAPA presidents in the region of Zurich, a CAPA president of the city of Bern delivers a smaller amount of narratives in August 2015.

**Table 2** Narratives by CAPA speakers.

NR.	DATE	NEWSPAPER	SPEAKER	HERO	VILLAIN	VICTIM
1	07.01.15	TA	Head of the CAPA presidential association in the canton of Zurich	0	Grandparents (generalized statement, not case-specific)	0
2	23.01.15	TA	Head of the CAPA presidential association in the canton of Zurich	0	Municipalities	0
3	23.01.15	TA	Head of the CAPA presidential association in the canton of Zurich	0	Municipalities	0
4	23.03.15	Blick	CAPA Winterthur-Andelfingen (district of the double infanticide)	0	Grandparents from the family of the double infanticide	0
5	02.04.15	Blick	CAPA Winterthur-Andelfingen (district of the double infanticide)	0	Hagenbuch (a municipality in the canton of Zurich)	0
6	02.04.15	TA	CAPA Winterthur-Andelfingen (district of the double infanticide)	0	Hagenbuch (a municipality in the canton of Zurich)	0
7	18.05.15	NZZ	A regional CAPA in the canton of Schwyz	0	Simon B. (a father who ran amok)	0
8	03.08.15	NZZ	President of the CAPA in the city of Bern	0	Parts of the national executive and parliament	CAPA
9	03.08.15	NZZ	President of the CAPA in the city of Bern	0	Politicians on the national level	CAPA
10	03.08.15	TA	President of the CAPA in the city of Bern	0	Politicians on the national level	0
11	03.08.15	TA	President of the CAPA in the city of Bern	0	Parliamentarians on the national level	0
12	11.08.15	NZZ	President of the CAPA Winterthur-Andelfingen (district of the double infanticide)	0	0	CAPA employees

In terms of narrative content, a first finding concerns the distribution of narrative characters. [Table 1](#) shows that heroes are completely absent from CAPA speaker narratives, and victims appear only rarely as well. The majority of narratives is dominated by villains.



The villain characters in CAPA speaker narratives may be divided into three groups, namely CAPA target group members, municipalities, and politicians on the national level.

Concerning CAPA target group members as villains, narratives Nr. 1, 4 and 7 exhibit grandparents and a father. These narratives refer to classic case constellations the CAPA deal with when implementing the CAPL. The individuals deemed in need of support are children who live in problematic family situations. The CAPA intervenes to protect the children from their parents: Narrative Nr. 7 is about a man who ran amok and shot his parents- and brother-in-law; narratives Nr. 1 and Nr. 4 depict grandparents who sabotage the CAPA's actions by being aggressive against the CAPA and by agitating the children against the CAPA's measures.

The second group of villains that CAPA speakers depict in their narratives are municipalities. While the narratives vary in their specificity – Nr. 5 and 6 target a single municipality, Nr. 2 and 3 are about municipalities in general –, they stand for the same substantial criticism. The CAPA reproach municipalities for doing flawed policy implementation, for instance by delegating cases to the CAPA that they should solve themselves. These narratives are located in the context of a bigger debate that existed already before the double infanticide and that got amplified during the reputational crisis. As illustrated in Stauffer (2022b), the municipalities were more active in this conflict, reproaching the CAPA of overpriced policy measures. The narratives we see here are the CAPA's answers to their arguments.

The third group of villains in CAPA narratives are politicians on the national level. These narratives – Nr. 8, 9, 10, and 11 – all stem from a president of the CAPA in the city of Bern and were published in two newspapers on August 3 2015. In an interview with a Sunday newspaper that was picked up both by the NZZ and the Tagesanzeiger the following day, this president reflects on the double infanticide and on what happened with the CAPA in its wake. He accuses national politicians of being opportunistic: Whereas they had been the ones to initiate the reform that created the CAPA, they either remained silent during the reputational crisis or joined the attacks against the CAPA for electoral reasons. The president demands informational campaigns to inform the public about the CAPA and its mission.

The only victims appear in the Bernese CAPA president's narratives and a narrative by the CAPA president from Winterthur-Andelfingen a week later. According to these two presidents, the CAPA became victims after the double infanticide. The following quote by the president from Winterthur-Andelfingen serves as an illustration:

*But after the infanticide in January, Fischer says she noticed an increased distrust towards the authority. "We are often perceived as not being supportive, but still we have to make difficult decisions." This is really stressful for the employees, she says.*  
 (Neue Zürcher Zeitung 11/08/2015)

## 5.2 RAPPORT ROUILLER

What happened in the French-speaking part of Switzerland? Although the available data is limited, three aspects become particularly evident in comparison to the German-speaking part of Switzerland. First, the investigation report by the emeritus federal judge Rouiller raised serious accusations against the CAPA. Table 3 shows that out of 25 identified narratives, the CAPA features as villain in 17 (68%).

	ABSOLUTE NUMBERS	IN %
No. of articles	12	–
No. of narratives	25	100
Villains	21	84
Victims	7	28
Heroes	7	28
CAPA as villain	17	68
CAPA as victim	0	0
CAPA as hero	1	4
CAPA as narrator	2	8
Political representatives as narrators	2	8

**Table 3** Overview of results from the media analysis on the "Rapport Rouiller".

However, as in the German-speaking part, the CAPA hardly commented on the matter in the media. Only two narratives originated from the CAPA. In addition, there are two from political representatives, i.e., one from the responsible Department of Education, Youth and Culture and one from the cantonal government (see Table 3). In contrast to the German-speaking CAPA, almost all (close) CAPA actors in French-speaking Switzerland told narratives with heroes (see Table 4). Namely, they portrayed the CAPA as hero who contributes to problem solving as for example in the following narrative:

*[T]he head of the SPJ [CAPA, Youth and Protection Services] rejects the accusations (...). “It is wrong to say that nothing has been done since the Rouiller report,” he explains. According to him, all complicated situations have been “identified and re-examined”. (24Heures 25/09/2018)*

NR.	DATE	NEWS-PAPER	SPEAKER	HERO	VILLAIN	VICTIM
1	25.09.2018	24Heures	President of the Cantonal Court	0	CAPA (Youth Protection Services)	0
2	21.09.2018	24Heures	Head of the CAPA (Youth Protection Services)	CAPA (Youth Protection Services)	0	0
3	25.09.2018	24Heures	Head of Department of Education, Youth and Culture	Department of Education, Youth and Culture	0	0
4	25.09.2018	24Heures	Cantonal government	Cantonal government	0	0

**Table 4** Narratives by CAPA speakers or close political actors.

Secondly, it is striking that in French-speaking Switzerland the implementing body of the CAPA (the Youth and Protection Services) and the supervising body of the CAPA (the Court or “Justice de Paix” in French) are often separated. This leads to mutual blaming as for example this statement of the President of the Cantonal Court shows:

*(...) the system in place is that the SPJ investigates and the court renders decisions. The SPJ is, in a way, the eyes and ears of the court. One cannot reproach the [court] for not having taken into account documents when many documents were simply not transmitted by the SPJ. (24Heures 25/09/2018)*

In German-speaking Switzerland, this distinction is not made; the media simply speak of “the CAPA”. This can probably be explained historically, since the authorities in their current form in German-speaking Switzerland were completely newly established following the national policy reform in 2013. In French-speaking Switzerland, on the other hand, there was an institutional system in place that largely met the requirements of the new policy and the existing authorities therefore remained almost unchanged (see Stauffer 2022b).

Thirdly, compared to the case in German-speaking Switzerland, it is striking that the responsible political authorities in French-speaking Switzerland reacted relatively quickly with official apologies, acknowledged mistakes and accepted the recommendations for improvement made in the “Rapport Rouiller”. For instance, the head of the Department of Education, Youth and Culture said:

*The State does not minimize its responsibility. The mission that was entrusted to it with these eight children “has failed”. “We are sorry for this human tragedy and the failures that contributed to it. It is an extremely hard case that has undermined the state responsible for protecting children”. (Le Temps 24/09/2018)*

Among other changes, an “Ethics and Protection Commission” was formed in the wake of this scandal (Le Temps 05/10/2018; 24Heures 21/09/2019). An expert explained the function of this commission as follows:

*(...) this commission is there to accompany the SPJ [CAPA, Youth and Protection Services] in very complicated cases. Where the SPJ realizes that ‘now we really do not know what to do, we need someone from the outside to give us ideas’. That was clearly an effect of this debate (...). (Expert 1)*



In addition, there were two dismissals in the implementing body of the CAPA: Both the head of the main CAPA office and the head of the regional office that had been responsible for the family with the eight children had to leave very soon after the publication of the “Rapport Rouiller”. The head of the Department of Education, Youth and Culture justified this with the announced reforms and the intended “cultural change” within the CAPA (Le Temps 05/10/2018; 24Heures 10/10/2018).

With that, this scandal largely disappeared from the media and the negative public attention died down much faster than in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. An expert summarized the events around the “Rapport Rouiller” like this:

*Nothing happened [in the Romandie] with the CAPA. Zero. A big investigation was ordered, everything as it should be, but there was no debate (...). Well, it was a scandal in the media for a short time, but they did not attack the authorities. But more ‘that it is crazy, how can something like this happen?’, in this way. (Expert 2)*

## 6 COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION OF THE CASES AND LIMITS TO GENERALIZABILITY

Comparing the two cases of the double infanticide in Flaach in the German-speaking part and of the publication of the “Rapport Rouiller” in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, both of which led to major attacks against the corresponding CAPA, our results show how in German-speaking Switzerland, negative media reports increased sharply and caused lasting damage to the CAPA’s reputation. CAPA actors and official political representatives remained passive, whether out of ignorance, being overwhelmed, political motivation, or other reasons, leaving the floor to political opponents and individuals who portrayed the infanticide in highly emotional ways. While also the CAPA in French-speaking Switzerland remained conspicuously silent during the scandal, the media noted a certain level of responsiveness on the part of the relevant actors. This difference may partially explain why the scandal in French-speaking Switzerland did not lead to a full-blown crisis as was the case in German-speaking Switzerland.

Hence, although it may be tempting for authorities to lay low during a reputational crisis, proactive communication can be worthwhile, including the admission of blind spots or mistakes. While in the short run, this may provoke some reputational damage, it pays off in the long run: Open communication fosters an image of integrity and helps to keep a minimum amount of control over the public debate. Carefully crafted narratives are useful in this endeavor, as they increase the probability of the message’s successful transmission.

There are a couple of caveats as to the generalizability of our findings for other public authorities. First, public communication is of course more comprehensive than just the narratives we have coded. When pure descriptions are uttered, this does not fall into our analysis grid. Nevertheless, it makes sense to focus on narratives as they stick particularly well with people. Second, we did not look directly at the communication of the CAPA, but only at what ended up in the media. However, this is the information conveyed to the public, which ultimately counts. Third, the CAPA are not as alone as it may seem in our cases. Kuenzler (2022) shows that CAPA get reputational support from actors outside the organisations who step in to defend them during reputational crises. Finally, our case selection does not allow for general claims of causality (cf. section 3).

## 7 CONCLUSION

The present article studied the reputation management of highly contested public authorities during full blown attacks from public opinion, social media and classic media. We find that while in German-speaking Switzerland, negative media reports increased sharply and caused lasting damage to the CAPA’s reputation, the scandal in French-speaking Switzerland did not escalate and did not cause damage to the same degree. The stated limits of our research notwithstanding, we argue our results are not only relevant for the CAPA, but also for other political authorities that face the double challenge of effective policy implementation and successful public communication in times of decreasing trust in public institutions and accelerated media dynamics through online platforms. We derive three core lessons for public authorities under attack.

The first recommendation is to speak up. The CAPA have often claimed that they cannot communicate because they are not allowed to disclose case information. This is a common justification for public authorities under attack to remain silent. However, the first narrative in [Table 2](#) shows that it is still possible to counter public attacks. The recommendation is to make generalized statements, not case-specific ones. This sort of communication helps to put specific cases into perspective and generate understanding for the authorities' actions. The CAPA are aware of this. They meanwhile work on their communication and develop media strategies.

We posit that developing media skills should be highlighted as a positive example. A minimal requirement for public authorities is to provide their operating heads with media skill training, as they may have to represent their organization in public. This applies also to decentralized and subnational organizations such as the CAPA: Our analysis has shown that even "small" authorities may get into the public focus. A good media skill training should both sensitize participants regarding their organization's political environment and inform them about adequate and effective ways to communicate with the public. We provide more advice on what such effective communication could look like below.

Second and in a similar vein, public authorities are well advised to entertain good and close relationships with media. It was outside the control of the CAPA whether their statements ended up in the media, journalists decide what they want to publish. In the Flaach case, however, we can see from the number of narratives that the topic was newsworthy, so it was not that the journalists were not interested at all. Considering the general attention paid to the topic and the relatively high standards of journalistic ethics in Switzerland such as balanced reporting, obviously there would have been room for improvement in the proactive communication of the CAPA. The corresponding learning is to entertain good contacts with media, to communicate more offensively and more media-friendly.

Third, public authorities under attack should provide narratives with heroes. While research in this area of NPF research remains scarce, Jones (2014) shows that the hero character evokes affective commitment in recipients of a narrative, and is thus particularly persuasive. Chalaya et al. (2022) additionally provide first evidence that the casting of different actors as heroes result in different degrees of a narrative's persuasiveness. However, further research is needed to provide sound advice regarding particular hero characteristics.

Although the numbers are small, our findings seem to support the above findings, as CAPA actors in French-speaking Switzerland tended to use more heroes in their narratives. More specifically, they portrayed themselves as heroes and thereby showed how they actively contribute to problem solving. In combination with the public apologies of the responsible department, this could be a (partial) explanation for the fact that the scandal in French-speaking Switzerland did not lead to a full-blown crisis as was the case in German-speaking Switzerland. In the case of Flaach, the president of the CAPA from Bern went public and spoke up with clear language. However, he did so only months after the scandal, and he only used negative narratives, with politics as villain and the CAPA as victim. In sum, the overall lesson for public authorities under attack is: Dare to speak in narratives! Narratives, particularly positive ones with heroes, stick well with the listeners and leave a positive impact. Our findings indicate that authorities are well advised to bring in more narratives in addition to neutral information. Narratives need not breach target groups' right to privacy, as authorities may anonymize and generalize information in the course of crafting a narrative. Importantly, narratives should provide an adequate impression of authorities' work and challenges. By combining neutral information with narratives, authorities may harness the advantages of both communicational devices. This is necessary, as public organizations can no longer rely on a general belief in the state and respective resources of public trust. The last decades both politically in the wake of neoliberalism as well as technically with the digital transformation of communication have witnessed fierce attacks against state actors. Public authorities who do not participate in modern forms of communication will lose out in terms of reputation, as the CAPA case shows. In contrast, authorities that respond to public scrutiny in narratives that are accessible to the broad public perception stand the chance to increase their reputation and consequently their organizational capacity to fulfil their mission.

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendices.** Appendix 1 and 2. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ssas.169.s1>

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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