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Backstage Media-Government Negotiations: The Failures and Success of a Government Pitch

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Media pressure on government and public administration has intensified radically in recent years. This article analyzes the behind-the-scenes processes of a strategic government pitch that aims to push the success and core values of Norwegian immigration policies in the media. The study brings attention to the complex and often conflicting demands on government officials engaged in proactive media strategies. It examines how the officials adapt to the news media logic, perceive the competition with other strategic actors, and simultaneously pay regard to the constraints inherent in a bureaucratic ethos. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, the article illuminates how bureaucrats legitimize proactive strategies; the risks involved; and how these strategies modify the distinctive roles of political leaders and civil servants, challenging traditional bureaucratic values such as impartiality, neutrality, and loyalty.

Keywords: government–media relations, public administration, mediatization, immigration news, ethnography

We see policemen enter a dark and crowded apartment in the middle of the night. Drowsy young men, their faces blurred to hide their identity, are abruptly woken up. The police declare that, because their asylum applications are rejected, they are not allowed to stay in the country and will be expelled. The young men are handcuffed, accompanied to the airport, and escorted onto waiting airplanes. The next images show the Norwegian minister of justice in his office. Energetic in front of a PowerPoint presentation, he demonstrates how all arrows point in the right direction: More illegal immigrants are expelled from the country more quickly and efficiently than ever before. The next image sequence, filmed from a distance, shows drug dealers pushing drugs in downtown Oslo. The implicit allegation is that they are false asylum seekers. Back in the office, the minister explains: Those who do not warrant asylum must be promptly deported, while those who are permitted to stay are properly taken care of.

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This report was the top story on the prime-time TV2 Norwegian evening news bulletin on June 19, 2011. The next morning, in the open-plan office of the communication staff of the Ministry of Justice, the mood is good. A political executive enters, and, in high spirits, he declares that the report was a "dream story," with the minister having the scene to himself, presenting the core message of the government: that loads of people are deported from the country and that the immigration policy is *efficient, strict—and just.* The report, in which no opposing voices were heard—and where the immigrants in focus remained without an identity or personal story—was the result of a strategic, exclusive pitch from the Ministry of Justice. Its core message is similar to the messages of many Western governments, in both Europe and the United States, which seek to promote a turn to policies of detention and deportation to control immigration flows (De Genova & Peutz, 2010).

How did this government pitch come about? Studies focusing on source–reporter relations have traditionally characterized the power play between reporters and political elites as a symbiosis between two mutually dependent elite actors (see Davis, 2009, for an overview), where mistrust and cynicism have characterized the reporters' perception of politicians (Van Dalen, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2011) and vice versa (Brants, de Vreese, Möller, & Van Praag, 2010). Political communication scholarship has predominantly given government officials the upper hand in government–media relations (Bennett, 1990; Entman, 2004; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978). Particularly relevant here, immigration authorities are assumed to manufacture consent for their policies through the media (Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Santa Ana, 2002), strategically linking immigration to *illegality, crime, threat*, and the need for *control* (Kim, Carvalho, Davis, & Mullins, 2011).

More recent scholarship argues that, in the wake of intensified media pressure and critical news stories featuring failed policies, dysfunctional systems, and incompetent civil servants (Deacon & Monk, 2001; Gordon, 2000; Schillemans, 2012), governments have had little choice but to adapt to and even adopt *a media logic*. The theory of *mediatization* emphasizes how the news media influence other political elites and institutions, defining the constitutive rules of communication (Altheide, 2004; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 2010; Meyer, 2002; Strömbäck, 2011).

Whether attributing the upper hand to governmental elites or to news reporters, these studies of media–government relations tend to treat the *government* en bloc, without investigating the distinct roles of political executives, communication staff, and public servants.

This article draws attention to the different norms and expectations government officials seek to balance in their proactive media strategies. The focus is on how elected leaders, appointed communication officers, and expert bureaucrats each in their own right engage in these processes and how their different roles cause internal and external negotiations. Government officials are powerful sources backed by teams of highly qualified communication strategists, but researchers also need to take into account the power of professional, critical journalists and the news logic they represent; and, further, to what degree constraints expressed in codes of conduct, laws, and regulation restrict the range and scope of strategic media strategies (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2013; Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014).

Critical voices in political science have argued that the augmentation of media management, involving both the political and administrative part of government, has led to an undue politicization of civil service. As a consequence, norms of correct information linked to values of impartial and factual information risk being sacrificed in the name of political spin, promotion, and proactive pitching (Aucoin, 2012; Gaber, 2000; Mulgan, 2007; Ward, 2007). These studies however, risk underestimating the stability and continuity of the core values of bureaucracy. Providing fine-grained empirical data, this article aims to contribute to the theorization of proactive government media work.

The informal character of media management (Head, 2007) strongly invites a method of observation. The article heeds the call for ethnographic research that can open "black boxes of elite behaviour in Government" (Rhodes, 't Hart, & Noordegraaf, 2007, p. 2) and the backstage processes behind the news on immigration (Horsti, 2008). Combining qualitative interviews with the political executives, communication officers, expert bureaucrats, and immigration reporters involved, observation of the backstage negotiations between these elite actors, textual analysis of strategic internal documents, and the news reports published as a result of the process, the article provides insiders' views both on the government–media power play *and* the internal negotiations between permanent civil service officers and political leaders.

The article examines the strategies, dilemmas, and risks of government media management through three main research questions:

RQ1: How does the Norwegian Ministry of Justice plan, prepare, and launch media pitches, and how are its initiatives received by journalists?

RQ2: How do these proactive media strategies challenge the traditional distinction between the political staff and appointed bureaucrats in practice?

RQ3: What do the proactive media strategies say about the changing function of modern government concerning mediatization and politicization, loyalties and ethics?

Analytical Framework: The Premises for Government Communication

To grasp media work in modern governments, we propose an analytical framework grounded on three central perspectives. The first concerns the power of the news institution and its logic. The second focuses on how strategic actors can adapt to and profit from the news logic and use it to their own advantage. The third factor relates to how the communication strategies in central administration (as opposed to private enterprises and actors) are constrained by the norms, ethics, and rules of civil service.

(1) *The news logic.* The news media as an institution—although one in the process of technological reforms and under economic pressure—holds a particularly influential position within modern democracies. It is regarded as a key premise for the functioning of free democracies, and the media's right to access information, investigate powerful actors, and reveal failures and malpractices is widely acclaimed. This right is established in far-reaching freedom-of-information laws in several countries

(Roberts, 2005). The watchdog function of modern journalism is widely internalized and upheld within the journalistic community (e.g., Ettema & Glasser, 1998). This ideal journalistic mission is combined with the need to attract the target audience. Striving to keep the audience continuously updated in an ongoing competition with other news outlets, journalists employ certain generic news formats that are central across media systems and platforms. Although the news can change according to national and regional context, news values and news conventions are also highly similar across countries and media systems. News stories are relatively short, favor unambiguity, and are often episodic, focusing on a single event (Cook, 1998; Iyengar, 1991). News tends to focus on problems and conflicts and has a prevailing negativity bias (Hood, 2011). News needs faces and images to illustrate the case, and the use of personalization; stories with emotional cues; designating roles of heroes, victims, and villains; and a clear-cut black-and-white moral is typical (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). The news logic involves a specific *rhythm*, and the timing of news is essential: Journalists compete to be first with a breaking story and time their publication to maximize reactions from involved institutions and actors (Altheide, 2004).

Building on the seminal works by Cook (1998, 2006) and Altheide and Snow (1979), we argue that the news logic captures some intrinsic and basic part of the way in which the news media functions. The news media is an arena for stakeholders to exchange (conflicting) views and negotiate the legitimacy of their perspectives. To gain access to this arena and to disseminate their messages, they need to adapt to the time and form of news and also appeal to the moral judgments conveyed by the authoritative journalistic voice.

(2) *Strategic communication.* Many actors and organizations develop media strategies to build, secure, or save their legitimacy and reputation, competing for media attention (Davis, 2007). Strategic communicators seek positive media coverage (proactive media strategies) and work to avoid negative media attention and to keep their activities outside the spotlight of the news (reactive media strategies). These are processes that have led to the growth of public relations, and any organization above a certain size devotes significant resources to activities such as developing communication strategies, adjusting their organizational structures, and establishing relations with key news producers (see Pallas, Strannegård, & Jonsson, 2014, for an overview). Several studies have found that the more news conventions a story satisfies, the greater the chance that the story will attract media attention (Carragee & Roefs, 2004). Moreover, strategic actors also stand a better chance of gaining coverage if they identify and exploit news conventions by various forms of *information subsidies* (press releases, press packages, contacts for sources, etc.; Gandy, 1982) and by providing striking visuals and strong rhetoric (Dan & Ihlen, 2011). The ultimate success factor in such strategic media relations is when the media adopts a message, an argument, and a way of seeing things that furthers the organization's interests.

Although media relations have been professionalized across sectors, the organizations' economic resources (Heath, Motion, & Leitch, 2010), know-how/expertise, and ability to institutionalize public relations work impact on their media strategies (Ihlen, Figenschou, & Larsen, in press). As discussed in the introduction, modern executive governments have prioritized and professionalized their media management, but they have to compete for media attention with a broad variety of private, public, and nonprofit strategic actors and organizations.

(3) *Government constraints.* As official office holders, political elites are powerful and therefore *important* sources that journalists will turn to, although their messages may not necessarily be deemed *interesting* and, initially, are often not in accordance with the format requirements of news—emphasizing certain types of stories, visuals, and faces (e.g., Cook, 1998). Many studies assume, rather than test, that the shrewd spin doctors in government apparatuses use the whole tool kit of public relations and strategic communication to construct their messages in line with tabloid news values (e.g., Newman, 2002; Scammell, 2007). We argue that these studies underestimate the multiple constraints that may limit the strategic use of news conventions within government. From the few existing studies of the media work within public administration (Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjørnsrud; 2015; Ward, 2007), we know that, although civil servants *do* adapt to a news logic, they continuously strive to balance media strategies with internal bureaucratic standards for text production and information. These studies point to the importance of acknowledging that public bureaucracies are not a mere extension of politics and have their own rationale and ethos (Olsen, 2004). The civil service is held to higher standards of objectivity and veracity than are politicians (Mulgan, 2007) and is supposed to base its communication on expert knowledge and fact-based information. Defined through public administration law, written guidelines, and internalized codes of conduct, key bureaucratic values include correctness, impartiality, neutrality, accountability, and transparency (Kettle, 2008; Olsen, 2004; Weber, 1978). These are values that are fundamentally linked to the principle of the *Rechtstaat* and the imperative of avoiding power abuse and favoritism. As argued by Rosanvallon (2011), public bureaucracies in their ideal form foster a higher form of impartial public interest, not reducible to partisan consideration or the will of the majority. In essence, their democratic legitimacy is grounded in their ability to rise above subjective interests and political power games.

Reality is by necessity more intricate than what the ideals preach. Modern bureaucracies are complex organizations, and decisions are based on conflicting objectives and pragmatic decisions. A range of reforms within public administration involves new principles of organization and steering that might blur the traditional distinction between elected and permanent officers (Christensen, Lægreid, Roness, & Røvik, 2007). One such trend is the growth of communication departments, with an unclear status somewhere between the traditional expert bureaucrats and the political staff. Further, there has been a significant increase in the number of politically appointed staff, and more permanent civil servants function as strategic advisers to political leaders (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). These are trends that, even if their scope is disputed and if they vary from country to country, are signifiers of politicization processes. Government media work and media strategies are seen as indications of this development (Aucoin, 2012). Acknowledging these transitions, this article examines the heterogeneity of government actors and maintains that the extent to which standard bureaucratic codes of conduct place limits on media strategies needs empirical investigation.

A main argument ensuing from the three perspectives outlined above is that, in modern governments, strategic media work adapted to the news logic will meet different types of constraints inherent in a *bureaucratic* rationale or logic. The degree to which these constraints limit media relations in practice is an indicator of the power of mediatization and politicization processes in modern government.

Method

The immigration department at the Norwegian Ministry of Justice is responsible for formulating and coordinating legislation and policies on immigration, asylum seekers, and refugees. Many ministerial tasks have been delegated horizontally, leaving ministries with the strategic and general decisions in their respective fields (Bezes, Fimreite, Lidec, & Lægreid, 2013). The ministry is divided into seven specialized departments, in addition to the minister's office and the communication department. The minister of justice is the political and administrative head of the ministry. Like most modern communication units, the communication department is placed directly beneath the top level of the political and administrative direction of the ministry. In the Norwegian central administration, civil servants, including the communication officials, are characterized as being politically loyal but also professionally autonomous, paying close attention to universal procedural rules (Christensen, 2011).

The data analyzed in this article were generated from fieldwork in the ministry during a one-year period from April 2011 to April 2012. The fieldwork began with pilot interviews with central civil servants and leaders in the communication and immigration departments. Two researchers then conducted participatory observation in the communication department and immigration department in May and June 2011. Access was obtained after a lengthy process of negotiation with the director general of the immigration department and the head of the communication department. A contract of confidentiality was signed, indicating that no individual cases or third persons would be identified, and the Norwegian Social Science Data Services approved the project. When the observation period ended, interviews were conducted with key civil servants, the minister of justice, and the state secretary responsible for immigration policies to follow up on the findings from the observations.

During the observation period, the researchers were based in the communication department, where they studied all types of activities, attended staff meetings, and were privy to informal communication and telephone calls. Access was granted to the internal online database, including the digital archives where all media requests were logged. The researchers shadowed the communication officers who worked with topics related to immigration, and attended all their meetings with the migration department and with representatives from subordinate agencies. They attended various types of press conferences and media events arranged by the communication department. During this period, extensive field notes were taken, on-the-spot interviews conducted with numerous informants, and central internal documents—including media clips, media résumés, memos and minutes from meetings, principles of media handling, meeting diaries, and prospects for planned media events—were collected. During the observation period and in its aftermath, 16 formal, semistructured research interviews with 15 informants were conducted. Informants included the head of the communication department and the two communication officers who specialized in immigration-related topics, the director general, four deputy director generals, and three senior advisers from the immigration department. As part of the project, the cabinet minister and the state secretary with migration as his special focus were also interviewed about their media relations.

To supplement the interviews from the ministry, we also interviewed selected immigration reporters who had interacted with the ministry's communication department during our field observation.

Five reporters were interviewed about their relations with the immigration administration in particular, and on their professional routines, practices, and dilemmas in general. In this article, the reporter interviews are integrated into the discussions where relevant, although the analytical emphasis will be on internal practices and developments in the ministry. To ensure sufficient anonymity, no specific position is specified when informants are quoted (except for the minister of justice).

The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to two hours. They were all taped, transcribed, and later approved by the informants. A semistructured interview guide informed the interviews. Concrete episodes and news stories served as points of departure for our questions. All observation notes and interview transcripts were coded and classified in the qualitative data analysis software program HyperResearch. Building on a principle of data triangulation and critical source analysis, the data were analyzed and evaluated in the light of internal documents and central public documents outlining principles for the communication policy (AD, 2009) and ethical guidelines for the central public administration (Ministry of Modernization, 2005).

To present a case study based on a wealth of ethnographic data within the limited format of an article is indeed a challenging task and only allows discussion of one concrete empirical example, presented as the "firm but fair" case below. To secure validity, the selected case is exemplary in the sense that it epitomizes typical forms of practices and values, which are followed up on in the analysis and in the discussion section. However, one article cannot cover all the various and significant aspects related to the development of the role of civil servants and the media revealed in this case study. The selected case, which serves as a point of departure for the analysis of backstage government media work, is outlined in the following section.

Case: Pitching a Firm but Fair Immigration Policy

"The minister would like to repeat last year's success, and wants to meet with [Reporter A, a senior reporter in the largest national newspaper] tomorrow to pitch fresh immigration statistics over coffee," states the head of communication in the morning meeting. The communication section in the Ministry of Justice quickly arranges a meeting with the reporter and then starts processing the minister's request for talking points. The minister wants the immigration department to prepare the latest statistics on (a) the number of arrivals, granted asylums, and returns; (b) statistics on how fast the administration processes asylum applications; and (c) statistics on the reorganization of the initial case registration. A senior communication official immediately questions the third talking point and warns that the reorganization has *not* been entirely successful and is a sensitive political issue that has stirred internal conflict, which may surface if the minister promotes this initiative in the media. He proposes that the third talking point be deleted from the list and calls the political leadership to explain his concerns. The communication officer must have been convincing, because the third talking point disappears from the minister's agenda. The background documents prepared for Reporter A comprise statistics on asylum seekers, returns, asylum granted and the operating budget of the Norwegian immigration administration. The meeting between the minister and Reporter A is regarded as positive, but the journalist takes his time working on the story.

Fast-forward 10 days, and the mood in the open-plan office of the communication staff is glum. The story has finally been published, but Reporter A has not framed the article on the successful policies and efficient system as intended. Instead he has made his own calculations, foregrounding the increasing costs of current asylum policies and, not least, how the expenses will continue to increase in the future. Moreover, according to the expert bureaucrats in the immigration department, the reporter has miscalculated the expenses. The expert bureaucrats argue for having the numbers corrected, insisting "the facts should be correct," and want to write a letter to Reporter A's newspaper to set the record straight. The communication officials, on the other hand, consider Reporter A to be a lost cause and find a correction to be of limited value, because they consider the general trend in the article to be "correct enough." The communication department argues for a more ambitious counterstrategy: to update the statistics and (re)pitch the story to another selected media outlet with a stronger, sharpened core message of efficient policies.

The communication officials' decision to push the updated numbers to Reporter B (the leading immigration reporter on national television) stirs some debate. Reporter B is perceived by some as unpredictable and as someone who has "his own agenda," whereas others emphasize his impact as a high-profile reporter who has been "used a lot" previously, with "good results." The minister's preference for Reporter B settles the debate. This time around, the statistics are put in context and packaged before they are shared with the journalist. The bureaucrats synthesize key developments and provide a fancy presentation with graphs and figures, which makes the core message more accessible for the journalist. This time the story comes out "better" than the Ministry of Justice even dared hope for. A few days later, the news anchor opens the evening newscast with these words:

> *In one year, the case handling time for an asylum seeker has more than halved, at the same time record numbers of rejected asylum seekers are forced out of the country. But the minister of justice is still not content with the results; he wants to be even more efficient.*

The report opens with images of police squads entering a crowded apartment, as described at the very start of this article.

This case is exemplary in that it reveals how communication officers and top expert bureaucrats work together to promote the government's message in the news. It reveals how this type of pitching is based on calculated risks, where the outcome is uncertain but where the possibility of success seems to justify potential backfiring. How proactive media strategies are endorsed or met with constraints across the ministry (RQ2) and how the backstage players in the ministry plan, prepare, and launch media pitches to selected journalists (RQ1) are analyzed in more detail in the next section. The more profound consequences of these practices on the impartiality and independence of public bureaucracies (RQ3) will then be examined and problematized in the discussion.

Analysis

Perceptions of a Hostile Media and Internal Justifications for Proactive Media Strategies

The methods and strategies behind the "firm but fair" story are not particular or special in any sense. Many proactive initiatives were undertaken throughout our observation period, and interview data frequently refer to initiatives before and after the observation period. The pitching of news is described by the political arm of the government, the communication officers, and the expert bureaucrats as a relatively recent but common practice. This signifies a shift in the communication work in the ministry, understood internally as a necessary *response* to the increased pressure from the media and a need to move from reactive to proactive media strategies. Civil servants and politicians alike characterize the media as problem-oriented, carrying stories based on similar critical templates (Ihlen & Thorbjørnsrud, 2013). Informants stress that archetypical stories of suffering individuals, confronting a cold and inhuman state apparatus, are typical and recurring negative stories. The repeated exposure of internal conflicts and incompetency in the immigration administration are other typical negative journalistic frames (Thorbjørnsrud, 2015).

The following characterization of hostile media coverage by an expert bureaucrat is shared widely among the bureaucrats interviewed:

> In general I feel there's a strong focus on this idea of these faceless bureaucrats. Who won't let themselves be influenced by anything and are really thick-skinned and completely out of touch with the general public, and who just push their stuff through. Who always consider the general things to be most important, at the expense of individuals. (formal personal interview)

According to our informants, from the political leadership to the expert departments, the ministry's media strategies are necessary to regain the initiative in a conflict-oriented, intense immigration debate. In the words of the minister of justice:

> It was vital to us to set the agenda on all the issues categorized under the Ministry of Justice and not to be driven by others' agenda. It was our agenda that should be implemented. . . . Both in the stories that were negative for us, and in the positive stories, it was very important to have the initiative. . . . As I often say in the morning meeting with the information officials, we should not concentrate on what is in the newspaper today, but what should be there tomorrow. (formal personal interview)

Interviewees refer to such *proactive* media work as a relatively new phenomenon; this is how a senior communication official characterized the transition:

> I believe that today, in contrast to previous years, one puts way more emphasis on the fact that the ministry is a secretariat of the political leadership. Earlier, one claimed to be a general information and communication umbrella on behalf of the legal sector,

> independent of the political executives. . . . To strengthen the knowledge about the law and legal institutions, to improve the understanding of the rule of law; to contribute to as correct an image of the legal sector as possible and to participate in and influence the public debate about the legal system. I believe that today, to a larger extent, one works to promote government policies within the legal sector and spends more resources on promoting the minister and his policies. (formal personal interview)

The expert bureaucrats, for their part, are also very much involved in media strategies and media work, and, just as the political leadership, they express the need for counterstrategies and proactive strategies. In the words of one senior expert bureaucrat:

> It contributes to a stronger wish to be proactive and to pitch stories. "Pitching" is a new concept that we did not have some years back. One should try to be proactive and set the agenda, and not just meet the media requests. . . . I also believe it is imperative to break negative stories, unfortunate stories one is not proud of, to keep the initiative, timing, and framing, and not just wait for someone to find out and cause a scandal. (formal personal interview)

Correct "Enough"? Internal Negotiations and Preparations

As discussed, the bureaucrats on all levels and the political leadership of the Ministry of Justice share an understanding of intense media pressure, insufficient reactive media strategies of the public bureaucracy, and the need to take the initiative in public immigration debates. In their regular planning meetings, there was a continuous emphasis on proactive initiatives toward the media. This was particularly present in the weekly planning meetings of communication and immigration bureaucrats, where upcoming events were mapped, possible media coverage anticipated, and potential pitches discussed. Ideas for pitches usually came from the political executives (through the communication department) or directly from communication, although the senior expert bureaucrats also occasionally suggested positive media stories.

The internal negotiations do not concern *whether* one should pitch news for selected media but, rather, what type of information is suitable to promote government policies and when are facts and statistics solid enough to achieve positive media coverage. The immigration bureaucrats express more frustration with incorrect news and more caution in relation to media initiatives than do their counterparts in the communication department and the political executives. One point that was repeatedly discussed in meetings, and further elaborated upon in interviews, concerns the timing of news pitches; in other words, how to decide *when* a positive initiative or effects of a new policy is *ready* for the public. According to the expert bureaucrats, the political leadership is too shortsighted and too impatient when pitching news stories to the media. Expert bureaucrats see themselves as better qualified to evaluate possible negative long-term media effects, based on their often extensive experience of a critical media spotlight. Both the political leadership and the communication department valued this communication expertise. As one communication officer puts it: "They [immigration bureaucrats] are their own best media advisers." Similarly, a political executive characterizes the expert bureaucrats' media competency as follows:

> I believe that a media instinct is better grounded, and more present in the immigration department, and those working there, compared to, say, other parts of the bureaucracy who are not as exposed to the media. I believe so. They have acquired this knowledge over many years, and to us this is a major benefit, as it is a very controversial issue. The media attention is massive, and it is great that the civil servants understand what is sexy in the media. (formal personal interview)

The political leadership and the communication department usually wanted to promote positive developments—such as more efficient casework, fewer arrivals, fewer rejections, and lower costs—once they could identify short-term changes. The expert departments, on the other hand, argued that they had to make sure that the changes were more substantial before promoting them in the media, because they worried that the media and the political opposition would use the information against the minister if the trends did not last.

One expert bureaucrat who often articulated this concern on behalf of the expert departments argued in a meeting:

> Otherwise, about this idea of selling good news, I think we should be careful with good figures and statistics—they can easily be turned inside out. There are always some cases that take a long time—we know from experience that the media will find them. It's a bit like standing with one foot in icy water and the other in hot water: together it's lukewarm. It becomes an average; we ought to be careful. (statement in internal meeting)

For the communication officials, this view was labeled "defensive" and "overcautious." But the communication department occasionally takes the same defensive position toward the political leadership, as illustrated in the "firm but fair case. Even if they explicitly regard themselves as civil servants, the communication officers are mediators between the political leadership and the administration. Communication officials may be content with stories in the news that the expert bureaucrats dismiss as insufficiently nuanced or correct as long as the stories are deemed to be positive overall.

Another disputed topic concerned how to follow up on those proactive initiatives that did not go according to plan. The expert bureaucrats repeatedly notified the communication department about facts that were omitted in media reports coming out of government pitches or that were interpreted in a manner that misrepresented immigration policy and law, asking how communication officials intended to react toward the reporters. The key point here is that the bureaucrats do not argue against the practice of pitching positive news as such; rather, the disagreement concerns (1) conflicting views on what would serve the minister best and (2) that it is the bureaucrats at the end of the day who are responsible for ensuring that all information given to the press is formally correct. To them, it is of utmost importance that neither the reputation of the administration itself nor the image of the minister is discredited in public. Facts and statistics should be as indisputable as possible. They should also be "waterproof" in the sense that positive results within one area could not be outweighed by negative trends in other parts of the government of immigration.

Choosing the "Right" Reporter, and Reporters' Approach to Government Pitches

Another issue that caused internal debate was the choice of reporter. The negotiations between the bureaucrats and the political executives on which media outlet, or more precisely which reporter, to go to often involved conflicting perceptions on the risks involved and the quality of the reporters. The reporters selected by the communication department and the political leaders were all experienced immigration reporters and were characterized by the interviewees as "knowledgeable" and "professional" and, at the same time, "independent" and "unpredictable." According to communication bureaucrats, they target individual reporters who know the issue well from their previous work. For them, the right individual journalist is more important than the media type or news organization she or he works for. Journalists must belong to a national outlet with a large audience share, but their internal position and expertise are deemed more important than whether they represent a commercial or public enterprise. In contrast to the average all-round news reporter, largely considered ignorant of the Norwegian immigration system, the "immigration beat" reporters were described as well informed, even though they often published critical reports with which the ministry disagreed. Other common characteristics of the reporters selected for pitches were that they were influential within their own newsrooms, represented major national media outlets, and were generally supportive of government's strict immigration policies. One senior communication official describes the calculated risk and gains thus: "There is always a risk involved when we pitch a story—you never know how the reporter develops the story—and [the media] very rarely have these idealized positive stories" (personal interview, field observation).

The routine of organizing press conferences open to all media, although still practiced, is largely considered across the ministry as an inefficient use of time. In the words of one communication official, the traditional strategy "does not give any coverage; everyone gives minimal attention to press conferences. If you want attention, you have to pitch exclusively to selected journalists" (conversation with authors, field observation).

What was debated internally was whether the selected reporters could be expected to compromise the core message. As demonstrated by the "firm but fair" case, the communication department often had to pitch a story to more than one reporter before someone actually published it.

Our interviews with the key immigration reporters routinely approached by the communication department demonstrate the various and often unpredictable responses from journalists. Whereas some journalists convey a fundamental suspicion about the growth of the communication departments in particular, and government spin in general, others stress that, as long as the information provided is newsworthy enough, they have no principal objection against publishing reports based on government pitches. In the case described earlier, Reporter A represents this *classic critical approach.* He claims that he rarely writes these stories, which he characterizes as "spin and deception." He elaborates: "They try to convey a particular positive impression based on selected bits and pieces rather than the whole picture; this is a form of misinformation" (formal interview).

In contrast, Reporter B represents a more *pragmatic approach* to the ministry's media initiatives. To him, the newsworthiness of the information is more important than the motive behind the story. Asylum statistics, particularly statistics on deportations, are considered a "winner story" as long as the

numbers fluctuate and there is a new development to report on. A positive story for the ministry may also be a good story for his news channel—as long as the story is 100% exclusive and new (formal personal interview). At the same time, he stresses that he is not a passive mouthpiece for the immigration authorities and that he is not unaware of the political motivation behind a pitch and sometimes initiates alternative angles (this is largely confirmed by bureaucrats, who characterize him as unpredictable and with an agenda; see above).

A third approach is articulated by another immigration-beat reporter who was often involved with both the communication department and political executives during the fieldwork period, but not directly involved in the "firm but fair" case. Although in frequent contact with the communication officials, Reporter C was able to circumvent the communication department through his direct link to a political executive, who, according to Reporter C, is "less inhibited by his position than the communication staff" (formal interview). Reporter C has established a wide network of sources within the immigration administration, systematically investigates the immigration system, and routinely publishes very critical articles on immigration policy. At the same time, he admits to often publishing stories pushed by the ministry, and he curbs initial critical framing because he considers this will strengthen his close relations with the elected executive. His approach to government pitches is first and foremost *strategic*, a necessary tactic to nurture and strengthen his close contact with elite sources within the administration of immigration. These three journalistic approaches illustrate that, although the government officials have a good overview of the immigration beat, they cannot dictate immigration coverage and the outcome of government media initiatives is uncertain.

Discussion

Changing Loyalties and a Politicization of Public Bureaucracy?

The case analyzed here is representative of how immigration is framed in Europe and the United States. Today, most Western governments find it necessary to promote themselves in the media as "tough on immigration" (Donato & Armenta, 2011), because they are faced by immigration-skeptical public opinion and a growing, populist, anti-immigration movement. Combining the need for an efficient system with a strong emphasis on fulfilling international refugee conventions, the "firm but fair" policy (Jørgensen & Meret, 2012) is in no sense unique to Norway. The strategy of presenting irregular immigrants as anonymous threats who must be controlled is employed to counter the media strategies of pro-immigration activists and advocacy journalism, foregrounding human interest stories featuring innocent victims of an inhuman immigration policy (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2014). The present case can therefore reveal backstage processes and strategies relevant beyond the particular Norwegian circumstances.

The analysis of a government pitch demonstrates how media work in government is adjusted to the dominant news logic, based on sophisticated public relations and media competency and resources, but also constrained by central civil service norms and rules. This case is therefore a suitable vantage point to explore the different perspectives on media work in modern government, aiming to contribute

empirical clarity and theoretical insight. The examination of how governments try to promote their core message of a strict but fair immigration policy in the media through presenting favorable trends and statistics documents that this endeavor is not straightforward. Such government initiatives do not necessarily qualify as newsworthy or *interesting* according to the tabloid news logic (Cook, 1998). For journalists, good news is by default "no news." It is a journalistic instinct to examine the provided information and look for hidden problems and failures. Governmental sources, even if important and powerful, do not control the public agenda. When entering into interactions with journalists, knowledge of the journalistic field and its news logic is required. Still, even when source relations are close and professional, the risks involved are high, and media initiatives can fail. If and when top government officials convey a strategic message on immigration policies that can be infused with drama, action, and good visuals, however, their chances of obtaining media attention increases (Benson, 2013). In our case, although one journalist dismissed the pitch as a typical example of spin, another recognized the newsworthiness of dramatic deportations in the dark of night.

The analysis of internal backstage routines, strategies, and negotiations in the ministry reveals important changes in public information policies. Proactive strategies and exclusive pitches to journalists are recent phenomena that bureaucrats and politicians alike regard as a necessary defense against hostile and negative media coverage. The media, they argue, do not do justice to the broader picture of how the administrative and political systems work. We find that both the communication and expert bureaucrats are involved in the common practice of pitching exclusively to selected individual journalists, even though this adaptation to the journalistic requests for exclusive information is at odds with the official principle of giving the same information to all news media at the same time found in the communication guidelines of the central government (AD, 2009).

Although the different actors within central government share a basic understanding of modern media management and its requirement for proactive strategies, the different groups represent distinct interests and values. Political leaders see few problems with the new trend in media management focused on setting the public agenda rather than responding to it. The communication staff, for their part, have an ambiguous position between expert bureaucrats and elected leaders. They are closely tuned toward the interest of their political leaders and adopt a more pragmatic view on media relations than do the career bureaucrats, even if they formally are part of the civil service. The career bureaucrats, on the other hand, represent the strongest commitment to correctness and precision, grounded in the traditional bureaucratic rationale and ethics. We find that career bureaucrats are more cautious about launching pitches to the media; more explicitly concerned about the long-term consequences of government initiatives, and more uncomfortable with the news coverage that does not get the details right. Despite the central position of the communication department, it is the expert bureaucrats who are responsible for the content of the external communication of the ministry within their field and who are formally held liable if the data provided is proved unreliable or wrong (AD, 2009). The documented heterogeneity of the roles of the administrative and political staff in this public agency implies that processes of politicization are less clear-cut than often assumed (Aucoin, 2012; Gaber, 2000; Mulgan, 2007) and that there are vital constraints on government media work that inhibit the use of media strategies open to private actors and organizations with a softer commitment to documentation and accuracy. The civil servants constitute a buffer against political spin and branding with their factual orientation and more long-term policy

considerations, and they identify strongly with their profession as civil servants.

Still, the broad internal support for and scope and frequency of proactive media strategies raise vital questions regarding the role of the civil service in government media management. The widespread perception that the news logic does not do justice to the more system-oriented and abstract explanations of bureaucrats seem to strengthen identification and system loyalty rather than detachment and strict impartiality. The preferred counterstrategy, to pitch positive stories of successful policies, can result in a taken for granted orientation about what constitutes good and bad policies, shared by political leaders and bureaucrats alike. Strict impartiality and disinterestedness seem to be under pressure to the advantage of an increased significance of loyalty to the political and administrative system. In their proactive media work, the interests and values of civil servants appear to be more closely aligned with those of their political leaders (Bauer & Ege, 2012; Peters & Pierre, 2004). We argue that this loyalty is not limited to the party political leaders; it is as much a loyalty toward the administrative system itself and the discerned need to bolster its reputation and values independent of the different party color of politicians in office. To some extent, this *administrative loyalty* can be regarded as efforts to strengthen and secure bureaucratic values and independence in mediatized modern governments (see Thorbjørnsrud, 2015, for discussion).

This analysis is based on a case study from one country, within one sector. The questions discussed are, however, of a fundamental nature. The case illustrates generic challenges for modern governments and illuminates backstage elite media strategizing. This article addresses the largely undertheorized heterogeneity of government media work and offers an analytical point of departure which should be followed up in future studies examining how trends of politicization and mediatization interact and change the internal relations between bureaucrats and elected leaders, their respective strategies toward the news media, and the relationship between government sources and reporters.

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