

Serving the Media Ministers: A Mixed Methods Study on the Personalization of Ministerial Communication

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Abstract

The personalization of politics has received much attention in both the political science and political communication literature, but the focus has almost entirely been on party leaders and prime ministers. This study investigates the personalization of ministerial communication in Norway, a type of decentralized personalization. It combines a survey of communication workers; in-depth interviews with politicians, communication workers, political reporters, and top-level civil servants; and ethnographic observation inside a ministry. The article goes beyond media-centered perspectives, and identifies several potential drivers and barriers to personalization processes. Based on our mixed methods approach we find that ministerial communication in Norway is strongly centered on the minister in both reactive media management and the proactive promotion of the minister and new policies. This decentralized personalization is driven by both demands from the media and the strategic adaptation by political and administrative actors within ministries. Based on the rich empirically-grounded insights, the article discusses how the interplay between the logic of the contemporary, commercial news media, political ambitions, internal administrative ambitions, and changes in executive government shapes the personalization of ministerial communication, and illuminates how these multiple drivers of personalization are mutually reinforcing.

Keywords: Government; News production; Policy-making; Reporters; Personalization; Mixed Methods; Norway

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A key development in established democracies since the 20th century is the increased attention on individuals in political life, which is often called the *personalization of politics* (e.g., Campus 2010; Karvonen 2010; Kriesi 2012; McAllister 2007; Van Aelst, Sheaffer, and Stanyer 2012). Examined in studies of electoral politics, campaigning, and media coverage, personalization mostly emphasizes the growing importance of party leaders and prime ministers (e.g., Canel and Sanders 2012; Holtz-Bacha, Langer, and Merkle 2014; Kriesi 2012; Mazzoleni and Schulz 2010; Poguntke and Webb 2005; Sanders and Canel 2013). Some scholars even argue that personalization has resulted in the presidentialization of parliamentary democracies, as the prime minister's personal domination of the executive office is increasing at the expense of cabinet ministers (Poguntke and Webb 2005).

Intensified media pressure has also engendered structural changes throughout various types of political organizations. Contemporary governments expend more resources on professionalized and proactive communication strategies, resulting in the expansion of communication units in ministries (Heffernan 2006; Sanders and Canel 2013). In line with this development, scholarly interest in government communication and political public relations has increased (Sanders and Canel 2013; Strömbäck and Kioussis 2011). Although cabinet ministers in parliamentary democracies are frequently in the media spotlight and under intense public scrutiny, comprehensive studies of communication strategies and the priorities of cabinet ministers and their ministries remain scarce.¹ This study aims to fill this gap by examining the *personalization of ministerial communication*.

Due to their dual nature, ministries can contribute new perspectives regarding the scale and scope of the personalization of political communication. Ministries are government organizations with an information and communication mandate defined and constrained by

freedom of information laws and public service codes of conduct (Horsley, Liu, and Levenshus 2010; Laursen and Valentini 2014). At the same time, ministries are politically oriented and obliged to serve the minister and his or her needs regarding the electorate, cabinet, and pressure groups.² Whereas the public service mandate calls for neutral, factual, and comprehensive information (potential barriers to personalization), the ministry's role as a support organization for the minister may involve conveying proactive, persuasive, and strategic messages focused on depicting the minister as a strong and responsible leader (potential drivers of personalization) (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2015). In this study, we investigate the personalization of ministerial communication, understood as the increased attention on the cabinet minister as an individual. We ask: To what extent is ministerial communication focused on the minister, and what are the factors that influence such personalization?

The existing literature on the personalization of politics primarily maps the extent of personalization in media coverage or political campaigns, predominantly through quantitative, longitudinal studies of single countries or through comparative studies (see Holtz-Bacha et al. [2014] and Van Aelst et al. [2012] for informative overviews). Rather than measuring the extent of personalization, this study aims to illuminate the processes behind it and thereby reveal the external and internal drivers of and barriers to personalization in contemporary ministerial communication. We employ an analytical framework that combines perspectives from government communication literature (Sanders and Canel 2013) and studies of the personalization of politics (Bjerling 2012, Holst-Bacha et al. 2014, Rahat and Sheafer 2007, van Aelst et al. 2012: 201) to identify the factors and the relationships between those factors that influence the personalization processes in ministries.

The research design answers the call for innovative approaches and in-depth, empirically-grounded studies of political communication (Karpf, Kreiss, Nielsen, and Powers

2015) and government communication (Sanders and Canel 2013), using a mixed methods approach that combines survey, in-depth interviews, and ethnographic observation. This design illuminates how a combination of internal and external processes interacts and influence personalized communication in ministries: the demands made by (commercial) news media, the political ambitions of ministers, the career ambitions of communication experts, and the structural developments in executive government.

Personalization of Ministerial Communication: Drivers and Barriers

Processes of personalization have become a central theme in political science literature in general and in studies of political behavior and political communication in particular.

Broadly, most studies distinguish between the *individualization* of politics (more attention to and visibility of the individual political leaders at the expense of parties or organizations) and the *intimization* or *privatization* of political discourse (shifting boundaries between the public and the private and increased attention to personalities, character, and the private life of politicians) (Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014). Whereas individualization concerns *who* is foregrounded in political communication, intimization or privatization also studies *what* is emphasized in personalized communication. This study emphasizes personalization as individualization, which refers to when an individual comes to embody something—an idea, principle, or entity—that he or she literally is not but has become the face or representative of that something in the media (Bjerling 2012).

Personalization of ministerial communication is a type of *decentralized personalization* (Balmas et al. 2014, see also Karlsen and Skogerbø 2015). Balmas et al. (2014) differentiate this from *centralized personalization*, which refers to how power flows upwards to a single leader (e.g., party leader or prime minister). Centralization is arguably the dominant perspective in the literature on the personalization of politics and lies under the

presidentialization of politics thesis (Poguntke and Webb 2005). Decentralized personalization, on the other hand, describes how power flows downwards to a larger group of individual politicians who are not party or executive leaders (e.g., MPs or ministers).

In the existing scholarship on the personalization of politics, two primary drivers of personalization are often emphasized: *changes in the media* and *changes in the political system*. Moreover, that personalization in politics and media are often interrelated developments, which can be mutually reinforcing, is a point of departure for most of this literature. Personalization in politics encourages reporting that focuses on political leaders; such media coverage, which focuses on individuals, reinforces the processes of personalization in politics. The interplay between the news media and contemporary political and public organizations is illuminated in mediatization theory. Essentially, mediatization implies that news media is as an autonomous institution with its own norms that politicians and governments adapt to; the news media's logic (i.e., format, rhythm, and values) become an integrated part of other political practices and priorities, and political actors employ these media strategies to influence the public agenda (Altheide 2004; Hjarvard 2008; Strömbäck 2008). In this study, we use the interplay between media and politics as a point of departure and focus on four vital developments to help identify and analyze the relationship between different factors that can contribute to the personalization of ministerial communication.

The first development refers to *changes in media technology and the media coverage of politics* (Rahat & Sheaffer 2007): A key development is the decisive influence of television and the appearance of images and faces rather than text on television, which establishes an apparent, intimate relation between political leaders and the audience (Thompson 1995). Although news formats built on personal stories are not new, the role of individual actors and personal stories has been augmented in today's media landscape, which is influenced by networked, social media (Beckett & Deuze, 2016; Chadwick, 2013). Moreover, intensified

competition, commercialization, tabloidization, and popularization in the media sector have enhanced a type of news and political reporting focused on the personal and emotional, as well as highlighting strategic aspects of contemporary politics (e.g., Mazzoleni 2000; Meyrowitz 1985; Swanson and Mancini 1996; Holtz Bacha et al. 2014). Reflecting changes in the news media, *media personalization* broadly refers to news coverage characterized by heightened focus on individual politicians and a diminished focus on parties, organizations, and institutions (e.g. Rahat and Sheafer 2007; van Aelst et al. 2012; Wattenberg 1991). Hence, we expect that because the news media often requests and demands personalized media appearances from individual politicians, news media will do the same with government ministries.

The second major development refers to *changes in the political system*: More complex societies and weaker social ties (class, social strata) have changed the role and position of political parties (e.g. Dalton and Wattenberg 2000). Parties can no longer rely on loyal partisan votes; ideological differences have become less distinct; and political problems and solutions have become tied up in supranational relations (Holtz-Bacha et al. 2014; Bjerling, 2012). In their conceptualization of the personalization processes, Rahat and Sheafer (2007) distinguish between two main types of politically motivated personalization: *institutional* (changes in the political system and how it functions) and *behavioral* (changes in individual practices within existing institutional settings). Institutional personalization refers to “the adoption of rules, mechanisms, and institutions that put more emphasis on the individual politician and less on political groups and parties” (Rahat and Sheafer 2007, 66). The actual scope of formal institutional personalization, where the incumbent has extended his formal command over policy processes and policy implementation, is debated (Rhodes 2008). The evidence for behavioral personalization is stronger, particularly in regards to the personalization of election campaigns, where the emphasis is on the individual candidates

and their characters rather than the party (Karvonen 2010; van Aelst et al. 2012), and political leaders strategize to build their personal image (e.g., Balmas et al., 2014; Foley 2000; Karlsen and Skogerbø 2015; Kriesi 2012). Based on these studies, we expect that political party factors such as the ministers' political ambitions will contribute to the personalization of ministerial communication.

Third, *professionalization of government communication* represents a potential factor that influences the personalization of ministerial communication. As outlined in the introduction, ministerial communication is regulated by law and ethical codes of conduct to contribute to democratic deliberation by keeping citizens fully informed regarding the ministry's mandate, functioning, and policy processes (Laursen and Valentini 2014; Meier and Hill 2005; Mulgan 2007; Olsen 2008; Sanders and Canel, 2013; Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, and Ihlen 2014). Furthermore, most Western European countries have rules that ban the use of government communication that serves the incumbent and his or her political party during election campaigns (Sanders 2011).

Formally, this communication mandate of ministries represents an institutional barrier to personalization. In practice, however, lines are more blurred, as public service laws and freedom of information acts, even if they define vital constitutional principles that must be respected, do not specify how communication should be organized or directed in practice. Moreover, the different types of media guidelines adopted by ministries do not usually detail how communication work should be carried out (Thorbjørnsrud 2015). Contemporary governments and public agencies have professionalized communication and expanded their communication units (Heffernan, 2006; Sanders & Canel, 2013). These communication experts are primarily recruited from the journalism domain although public relations, marketing, and other social science backgrounds are also common (Jacobs and Wonneberger, in press, Sanders & Canel, 2013, 282-291). Principles from public relations, such as

exploiting news conventions to promote central branches of government, are increasingly employed (Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015), and such proactive strategies may personalize ministerial communication to promote a favorable image in the media of the minister and his or her portfolio.

Thus, on the one hand, we can expect that the professionalization and expansion of communication units will potentially increase the personalization of ministerial communication (more communication officials adopting and adapting to media personalization). On the other hand, ministry communication units in most Western liberal democracies include permanent civil servants who are held to bureaucratic standards of veracity and correctness (Mulgan 2007) and are subjected to rules regarding non-partisanship (Sanders and Canel 2013), which all constitute institutional barriers to personalization.

Fourth, *changes in executive government* can influence the personalization of ministerial communication. Wide-reaching public management reforms across Western democracies has led to fragmentation and disaggregation in public administration (Lægreid and Verhoest 2010), and agencies with different organizational structures and tasks have emerged in various countries (OECD 2002). This structural devolution has shifted responsibility for executing certain tasks from ministries to regulatory and service-producing agencies (Christensen and Lægreid 2007). As these agencies have more formal autonomy and are further away from the political executives, much of this literature has focused on the increasing need for and changing modes of control (Christensen and Lægreid 2001; Verhoest, Verschuere, Peters, and Bouckaert 2004). Less is known about how these developments affect the inner workings of ministries. As independent agencies have become important in developing policies and providing services and information to the public, some claim that ministries in recent decades have emphasized their role as a “secretariats for the political leadership,” as “top civil servants are expected to attend more to the daily needs of the

political leadership and to planning and policy functions” (Christensen, Lægreid and Roness 2002: 43). If this entails that ministries become more oriented towards serving the needs of the minister, these institutional developments can thus represent a non-media driver of personalization. At the same time, structural devolution may limit the ministry’s political portfolio, which may reduce and restrict which policy areas, topics, and cases the ministry is able to address in the media.

Ministerial Communication: The Norwegian Case

In the Norwegian parliamentary democracy, a minister, who is supported by two to four state secretaries and a political advisor, leads each ministry. In most of the 16 Norwegian ministries, one of the state secretaries or political advisors is responsible for communication with the head of communication and the communication unit (which is comprised of permanent civil servants) (Askim, Karlsen, and Kolltveit 2016). Administrative matters are the responsibility of the secretary general, the highest-ranking civil servant in a ministry. The ministries have about four to six expert departments organized in a classic pyramid hierarchy.

Like most Western democracies, the communication units in Norwegian ministries have expanded—from 50 communication workers in the mid-1990s to about 120 across the 16 ministries in 2016 (Sanders & Canel, 2013; Kolltveit 2016). Moreover, the communication units are placed directly beneath the ministry’s top administrative and political level, which makes them somewhat independent of the hierarchical pyramid (Statskonsult 2007).

Communication experts, similar to the other permanent civil servants, are expected to act professionally and neutrally (Christensen 2011), and ethical guidelines ban all civil servants from participating in political campaigning (Ministry of Modernization 2011:9). Based on the Freedom of Information Act (1970, revised 2009), public information is expected to be transparent, open, and accessible (Jørgensen, 2014). Apart from these vital juridical

interventions, daily governmental communication practices are lightly regulated by official guidelines (Thorbjørnsrud 2015). The cabinet ministers' communication strategy is mainly the prerogative of each individual minister (Statskonsult 2007: 19), and the heads of communication units meet regularly to coordinate communication .

In Norway, the prime minister is comparatively weak (O'Malley 2007), and the full cabinet and individual ministers are important actors in cabinet decision-making processes. In principle, the ministers are politically responsible for everything in their ministries and subordinate agencies (Christensen 2005). The minister can therefore instruct agencies and overturn agency decisions; however, for some agencies, the ability to instruct and overturn agency decisions is restricted by law (Christensen and Lægreid 2007).

The Nordic media systems are often described as models of Hallin and Mancini's (2004) democratic corporatist model (see Brüggerman et al. [2014] for an updated discussion) although the Norwegian and the other Nordic media systems have moved towards the commercial, liberal model in recent years (Nord, 2008; Ohlsson, 2015). Previous studies regarding the personalization of political communication in Norway have found that political leaders have been more accessible to the news media than political elites in other countries (Thorbjørnsrud 2013), while Norwegian political journalism is characterized as averagely personalized in quantitative, comparative mappings of personalization (see Van Aelst et al. 2016).

Methods and Data

This study used a mixed methods approach, combining a survey, qualitative interviews, and observation. The methods were closely integrated, as the questions in the interviews, for instance, were formulated based on insights from the survey and the observation. Our first main source of data was a survey sent to all communication workers in all ministries in late

2015.³ The communication workers' e-mail addresses were collected from government websites, and we used online survey tools provided by Questback to design, distribute, and collect the survey. The survey contained questions on the type and frequency of media requests, how such media requests were handled, and the ministries' strategic communication practices. It took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete the survey. After a total of four reminders, 40% of the communication workers responded (n = 49). No indications of analytically important bias were found in the sample.

The informal character of media management strongly invites observation (Head 2007), so we combined the survey method with ethnographic observation to illuminate backstage communication processes in government (Rhodes, 't Hart, and Noordegraaf 2007). One of the authors conducted three months of observation, October 2015 through December 2015, in the communication unit of one of the ministries (The Ministry of Health and Care Services). Access was obtained after a lengthy process of negotiation with the secretary general and the head of communication.⁴ Without any limitations, the researcher studied all types of activities; attended staff meetings; was privy to informal communication and telephone calls as well as the various types of press conferences and media events arranged by the communication department; and observed cooperation, meetings, interactions, and negotiations between the communication workers, the expert civil servants, and the political leadership.⁵

The survey and observation were supplemented with 30 semi-structured interviews concentrating on why the various interviewees focused on the minister. Interviews were conducted with communications workers (11 interviews, labeled Communication 1–11); state secretaries and political advisors (four interviews, labeled Political 1–4); the secretary general; the heads of departments (three interviews, labeled Expert 1–3); and 12 political reporters and editors (labeled Reporter 1–9 and Editor 1–2, respectively).⁶ The interviews

lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed. The informants approved all quotes used in this paper.

Empirical Analysis: Personalization Processes in Ministerial Communication

The empirical analysis is organized in three main parts: It first investigates to what extent and why reporters focus on the minister in their contact with the ministry (the media as a driver of personalization). Second, we explore to what extent and why the ministries' reactive and proactive communication strategies are personalized (political ambitions and professionalization of communication as drivers of personalization). Third, we analyze how the dual mandate of ministries and structural devolution comprise institutional barriers to personalization processes in ministerial communication.

Journalistic News Strategies and the Media as a Driver of Personalization

The survey data showed that the media has a clear interest in individual ministers. When reporters contact ministries, it is most often with a request for an interview with the minister (see Table 1). Reporters also contact ministries for general policy information, factual information, and interview requests for other ministry politicians, but this happens much less frequently.

[Table 1 about here]

The main pattern gleaned from the survey, presented in Table 1, corresponds to the findings from the observation in the ministry. Almost all reporters and editors who call the ministry press line ask for a statement from the minister as the head of the ministry (individualization), ranging from brief comments to extensive background interviews, studio debates, and shorter

interviews.⁷ When asked why it is important to involve the minister compared to other representatives from the ministry or policy sector—the reporters emphasized that the minister is the highest political executive in the ministry, and consequently, as the responsible leader, he or she is the most important person to confront. One senior reporter stated: “It signals that we are raising important issues (...) why go to Jesus when you can go directly to God?”⁸ The reporters explained they request the minister out of respect for their audience, as speaking directly with the minister demonstrates that they take their responsibility as critical watchdogs seriously. Other reporters highlighted that whether the minister replies in person or delegates the task signals how important the reporter’s story is to the ministry. If someone else in the ministry returns the call, the reporters know that they are not prioritized internally. Moreover, reporters argue that the audience relates to and recognizes the minister; he or she alone represents the political power in the policy sector, whereas other representatives from the ministry or subordinate agencies are largely unknown to most viewers or readers. For those who feel personally affected by a story, the reporters argue that it is reassuring when the minister is directly involved. Finally, the reporters often find the minister to be pointed and clear in his or her statements (a more professional source) in contrast to the state secretaries and spokespeople from subordinate agencies, who are often described as hesitant, insecure, and vague.

The ministry interviewees often highlighted that this individualization of the ministry’s media management represented a breach from previous practice. In the ministry, some communication workers attribute the perceived augmentation in requests for the minister to broader changes in contemporary journalism, such as commercialization, newsworthiness, and increased production pressure (the media as a driver of personalization). The head of communication, among others, rhetorically stated: “Stories are simplified, shorter, and more condensed. There is only room for a few sources in each story. Who can

answer the most questions? Yes, those on top.”⁹ According to a communication advisor, “the thinner the story,” the more important it is for the media to involve the minister in political debate, as the conflict between political elites often becomes the main news angle. He continues: “For the media, it is always more exciting to get comments from the political executives, not from the boring bureaucrats and experts in the agencies.”¹⁰

Although the ministry sources agree that the media’s overall interest in individual ministers has increased, communication workers also emphasize that media interest can be cyclical and relative (versus other stories), depending on how long the minister has been in office (a new minister is always more newsworthy) as well as election cycles (more attention closer to election day), indicating that the media attention to individual ministers fluctuates over time.¹¹ The media interest also varies between policy areas (some sectors are deemed more newsworthy) and between individual ministers (some individuals are deemed more colorful, outspoken, and newsworthy than others).¹² Overall, there is a growing media interest in individual ministers, with some variations in that interest from minister to minister.

Ministerial Communication Strategies and Internal drivers of Personalization

Although the research design does not allow for studying changes over time, senior ministry interviewees highlight that the way the current government communication policy is organized differs from former practices and policies. As part of the systematization and professionalization of ministerial communication over the last decade, all statements from the ministries is now channeled through the minister and his or her political team. Only the political executives talk to the media, supported by communication workers working behind the scenes.¹³ Whereas senior expert bureaucrats acted as frequent media sources 15 to 20 years ago, senior civil servants generally no longer give statements or respond to the media; moreover, there are no formal government or ministry spokespersons.¹⁴ To facilitate the

numerous media requests, communication workers have access to the minister's calendar and communicate frequently with the minister directly—and indirectly through political advisors throughout the day—to find time to meet interview requests. During the observation, the minister gave statements whenever he or she minister could find time—from his or her office, the lobby, in the car going to and from meetings—demonstrating that the minister was very accommodating to all media requests.

This adaptation to media personalization is also apparent in the ministries' proactive strategies, where involvement of the minister is used strategically to secure media attention. Asked in the survey to rate success factors when promoting stories to the media, the vast majority of communication workers across ministries stressed the importance of their minister fronting the story (see Table 2). Essentially, involving the minister and giving stories exclusively to selected media or reporters are rated as much more important to securing media coverage than the other listed factors: political conflict, illustrations, personal stories, and established relationships with reporters. This finding was reflected during the observation: In contrast to traditional strategies such as press briefings or press releases (although these are still carried out), exclusive pitches that include access to the minister were perceived as the most efficient strategy for securing media attention among ministry interviewees.¹⁵

[Table 2 about here]

In ministries, statements are now centralized and come from the minister or his or her political team. This represent an institutional, long-term driver of personalization of ministry communication. Furthermore, the ministry interviewees often highlighted the minister's personal motivation and political ambition when discussing this change in communication

strategy: “We serve the minister, and most ministers need to be visible, to be re-elected, and to be noted within the party and within the government.”¹⁶ Another interviewee explained that for politicians, “policy is not implemented before the public becomes aware of it,” and visibility is thus a necessity to demonstrate agency, efficiency, and control to voters.¹⁷ Additionally, it is politically important for the minister to signal control, engagement, and involvement in all the institutions and stakeholders in a policy sector. Thus, according to a senior civil servant in the ministry, it is necessary for the minister to participate in all the ephemeral, minute media debates regarding minor developments in the sector to demonstrate that he or she is alert, involved, and that the ministry’s policy is comprehensive.¹⁸

In the same way as the media’s interest in different ministers fluctuates, communication workers emphasize that there is room for personal style and individual variations among the ministers as well. The majority of the ministry interviewees had worked under several different ministers, finding that personal ambition, media competence, and media confidence influence the minister’s media initiatives and strategies. Although there is individual variation between ministers, most ministers are quite media-oriented. This accessibility arguably generates more media requests, as reporters find that they can obtain the ministers’ comments relatively easily, which motivates reporters to repeat the request at a later stage.¹⁹ Overall, the motivation of ministers to be present in the news is clearly linked to both their career ambitions as politicians *and* the need to promote the ministry. As seen in political parties, personal presence in the news has become a vital yardstick for future positions in the party hierarchy. As alluded to by communication officers, the line between the ministers’ need to promote the ministry as such and his or her interest in media coverage based in party political interests is not clear cut.

Another internal driver based in the professionalization of communication work is the communication officers’ responsiveness to the strategic needs of their political executives.

Overall, ministry communication workers are ambitious and hardworking, and they consider serving the minister one of their primary tasks. In this way, communication experts, as a new important group of civil servants and as ambitious professionals, are motivated to increase the minister's media presence to promote and secure their own careers and to promote the ministry and minister by employing their insights from journalism and marketing. A senior communication worker explained: "Either implicit or explicit, the minister demands visibility, and then our way to shine is through our (professional) networks and through promoting good stories and muting critical stories."²⁰ The high professional dedication among the communication workers was noticeable through their deep, often personal, engagement in ministry communication: Communication officials worked long hours to promote the ministry and the minister, regularly volunteered for extra tasks, followed the news media closely, and engaged with ongoing issues outside of work hours.

Besides the minister's and communication workers' motivation, the interviews suggest that personalization processes are also driven by sector-specific characteristics. Within the observed policy sector (health policy), the minister was often personally attacked and criticized for mistakes and maltreatment of the subordinate agencies and service providers. However, this media focus on the minister as an individual, rather than on the subordinate organizations and their leaders, was to some extent part of an intended strategy from the minister. As a top administrative leader explained: "He [the minister] has intentionally dragged the debate toward himself, 'I am the minister. I am responsible to Parliament. I am responsible for the steering principles and priorities in this sector.'"²¹ This personalized strategy was intended to re-politicize a field dominated by structural devolution and new types of market-based organizational forms where political responsibility had been relegated to the background.

Institutional Barriers to Personalization in Ministerial Communication

Even if, in principle, the ministers are accessible and gladly represent the human face of the ministry, there are many discussions concerning the delimitation of the ministers' appearances. The division of labor between ministries and agencies both drives and, occasionally, limits the minister's media appearances. Even if media requests are highly prioritized, many questions from journalists concerning detailed factual questions and case handling at lower administrative levels are after systematically delegated to the responsible subordinate agency. As one experienced communication advisor explained:

The minister is not a professional expert, not a specialist, but the subordinate agencies have these qualifications and the reporters should talk to them. . . . Yes, he is the politician in charge, but he gets his advice from the experts in the agencies. They are the specialists. I understand that it is difficult for the media, but the minister will be involved once the issue becomes politics . . .²²

During the observation period, the communication desk spent much time explaining the formal delegation of responsibility to frustrated reporters who demanded to speak with "the minister in charge." The processes of structural devolution thus also limited the individualized visibility of the minister, as the communication desk was instructed to systematically delegate non-political media requests to their colleagues in subordinate agencies (an institutional barrier to personalization).

Another institutional barrier to personalization is the ethical guidelines that ban civil servants from preparing material to and participating in election campaigns (Ministry of Labour and Government Administration 2009). Such considerations limit promotion of the ministry's political head: The communication department should not help the minister represent his or her party in the media; rather, the communication department should only promote the ministry itself. When the communication desk receives media requests that invite

the minister as a representative of his or her political party, the desk forwards the request to the ministry politicians, primarily to political advisors, who then delegate the request to the party's communication staff.²³ These formal restrictions on the politicized personalization of ministerial communication were highlighted in most of the ministry interviews in which the interviewees stressed that they did not engage in promoting the minister as a party politician. These requests are usually followed up by the party organization outside of the ministry's mandate, implying that the personalization of some powerful politicians, such as the minister, is carried out in two parallel tracks by two separate communication desks (party and ministry). Although these parallel tracks represent potential for increased visibility for media-oriented ministers, these restraints curb personalization processes within ministries to some extent. However, in practice, on the hectic communication desk, the lines between party communication and ministry communication are not always clear. While both the interviewed reporters and ministry officials emphasized that they can distinguish between the two roles of the minister (as party representative and ministry head), the observation showed that in daily media management, which involves working under stress and time pressure, separating and coordinating the two can be challenging.

Concluding Discussion

The results of this study clearly show that ministerial communication processes in Norway are personalized and focus on the minister. This is evident from what the media requests as well as what the ministry, specifically the communication experts, provide. Scholars have questioned the empirical evidence for the personalization of politics and challenged the view that the personalization of politics is an overarching phenomenon (Adam and Meier 2010:35). Our results clearly show the decentralized personalization processes in the Norwegian executive government, demonstrating that personalization processes do not

simply empower party leaders and prime ministers at the expense of other political actors (Poguntke and Webb 2005). This study has illuminated personalization as the *individualization* of politics, where journalist and civil servants focus on the minister at the expense of the ministry, a type of personalization that is not incompatible with ensuring policy substance per se. Rather, the ministry interviewees argued that individualized proactive media strategies are necessary for communicating substantial policies and initiatives.

By analyzing personalization processes in ministerial communication through mixed data and methods, this comprehensive study aimed to identify the various factors as well as the relationships between those factors that influence personalization.

First, the media's focus on the minister is clearly related to the developments and requests of the media (media personalization). More precisely, the interviewed reporters argued that they request the minister because he or she is the political executive; speaking with the prime minister signifies that reporters take the story seriously; reporters' audiences can identify with the minister; and the minister is a professional, media-savvy news source. Overall, these arguments are in line with a classic conception of the journalistic role in which the journalist acts as a watchdog who challenges those in power. Ministry interviewees agree that the media increasingly requests the minister in person, but they understand this as a consequence of the tabloidization crisis and the 'dumbing down' of contemporary political journalism.

Second, following changes in the political system, ministries themselves push the decentralized personalization processes. Although all ministers are expected to be visible in the media, there is room for individual variation (behavioral personalization). This ministry-driven personalization is related to the personal ambitions of the minister and how he or she

employs the media attention to benefit his or her position inside the cabinet and toward different party political actors, the constituency, and the electorate.

Third, the needs of the minister impact on and interact with the skills, professional priorities, and personal ambitions of the communication experts. Today, communication experts constitute an expanding and significant unit centrally positioned close to the political executive level in public ministries. It is only the executive level that communicates for the ministries (no spokespersons or lower level personnel), which is an institutional driver of personalization. Moreover, communication experts are evaluated on the extent to which they contribute to successful media stories for their minister. We can therefore identify the following key variables that influence the role of communication experts in personalization processes: From their professional background, they recognize the need for using individuals to achieve media attention. Further on, it is in their mandate to serve the minister in his or her communication effort. To what extent this is a driver or a constraint of personalization largely depends on what the minister in office wants. If the minister wants to be the focus of attention, both the ingrained media logic and the ‘serving’ mandate push for personalization. However, the traditional bureaucratic logics and values such as professional standards, impartiality, effectiveness, and openness also apply to communication experts (Jørgensen & Bozeman 2007; Jørgensen & Rutgers 2014), which may curb the impact of the other variables, at least at the outset.

Fourth, other structural changes in executive government have affected the personalization of ministerial communication, as responsibility has shifted from the ministries to semi-autonomous agencies. The health sector is an illustrative case of how market-based organizational forms (establishment of health enterprises as hospital owners) have increased the distance between citizens and politicians. In our study, the minister therefore tried to re-politicize the field by pulling the debate toward himself, which increased

personalization. However, the formal distinction between ministry and agency is also used as an argument to shield the minister from the press.

The field observation and interviews were carried out in a type of ministry (health) with medium to high saliency (Druckman and Warwick 2005) led by a media-oriented minister, and other ministers and ministries might have less proactive, less personalized communication processes. However, we found little evidence of such differences in the cross-ministry survey data. Conducting surveys, interviews, and observations over a longer period would have made it possible to make more definitive statements about developments over time. In addition, studies across countries would have ensured greater generalizability, but such broad comparative ethnographic research is complicated by the lack the access to backstage processes in many countries (Garland, Tambini and Couldry forthcoming 2017).

Our results show how personalization of ministerial communication is shaped in an interplay of media pressure, political ambitions, politicization pressures, internal administrative climbing, professionalization of government communication, and processes of structural devolution. Thus, personalization processes in ministries are influenced by the reciprocal relationship between the media, politicians, and bureaucratic organizations (Donges and Jarren 2014). The four main factors central in this relationship are not specific to the Norwegian case. However, some of these aspects may especially influence personalization processes in Norway compared to other systems.

First, studies indicate that political leaders in Norway are more accessible to the news media than political elites in other countries (Thorbjørnsrud 2013). Thus, the media's insistence on talking to the minister is likely stronger in Norway than in countries where political leaders are more shielded and distant. Moreover, Norwegian cabinets have strong collegial traditions, and the ministers are politically responsible. This might increase the media's interest in the ministers as well as increase decentralized personalization compared to

countries in which power is concentrated in the prime minister. Third, in Norway, communication experts are civil servants, and this should, at the outset, reduce their role in personalization processes compared to systems where communication units are politically appointed. However, although they must refrain from political party communication, communication professionals adhere to media logic and increase personalization processes in ministries. Although decentralized personalization processes in ministerial communication might be particularly strong in Norway, future comparative studies should investigate differences in the personalization processes of ministerial communication based on the factors identified in this study.

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Footnotes

¹ Exceptions include Carpenter (2001); Carpenter and Krause (2012); Reunanen, Kunelius, and Noppari (2010); Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, and Ihlen (2014); Schillemans (2012); and Thorbjørnsrud (2015).

² See Davies (2002) for a discussion.

³ At the time of the survey, the Solberg cabinet (Conservative Party and the Progress Party) was in office. The cabinet came to power in 2013.

⁴ Confidentiality agreements were signed, indicating that no individual cases or third persons would be identified.

⁵ No major scandals erupted during the observation period, and the period can be described as hectic but normal.

⁶ To preserve the interviewees' anonymity, the exact titles of the interviewees are not given; only the category to which the interviewees belong is provided. For the sake of transparency, each interviewee was given a number for the reader to determine who is quoted throughout the text.

⁷ In Norwegian ministries, all media approaches are channeled through the communication units, which manage all requests from the media, stakeholders, and the public. As part of the professionalization and systematization of government communication, the media is guided to use the central press phone number and communication desk email.

⁸ Reporter 6, formal interview 2016

⁹ Communication 3, formal interview 2016

¹⁰ Communication 6, formal interview 2016

¹¹ Communication 5, personal interview

¹² Informal discussion, communication desk 2016

- ¹³ Communication 3, formal interview 2016
- ¹⁴ Expert 3, formal interview 2016
- ¹⁵ Communication 1–9, formal interviews 2016
- ¹⁶ Communication 1, formal interview 2016
- ¹⁷ Communication 3, formal interview, 2016
- ¹⁸ Expert 1, formal interview 2015
- ¹⁹ Communication 5, formal interview 2016
- ²⁰ Communication 1, formal interview 2016
- ²¹ Expert 1, formal interview 2015
- ²² Communication 7, formal interview 2016
- ²³ Communication 1–9, formal interviews 2016

Tables

Table 1

The Types of Media Requests to Ministries

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	<u>N</u>
Interviews with the minister	2	7	0	62	29	4.14	47
Short, factual information	0	12	45	33	10	3.43	47
General information on policy within the ministry's sector(s)	5	26	28	36	5	3.11	47
Interview with others in the political leadership	2	33	33	29	2	3.03	47
Formal information requests	14	57	21	5	2	2.22	47

Note. Survey question: How often is your contact with reporters about the following... Five-point scale = not at all, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent. N = 47 communication workers. Frequency (percentage) and mean on a scale from 1 to 5.

Table 2

Factors that Contribute to a Media Story's Success

	1	2	3	4	5	Mean	<u>N</u>
The minister is fronting the story	0	2	7	30	61	4.50	46
The story is given exclusively	0	9	23	27	41	4.00	44
There is a political conflict on the story's topic	2	5	32	46	16	3.68	44
The story can easily be illustrated with photos	2	17	36	33	12	3.36	42
The story can be told through personal stories	0	28	35	30	7	3.16	43
There is an established relationship with the reporter	0	24	49	22	4	3.07	45

Note. Survey question: When you are working to get a story into the media, how crucial (for success) is it that.... Five-point scale = not at all, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent. N = 42–46 communication workers.