

Between spin doctor and information provider: Conceptualizing communication professionals in government ministries

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Abstract

Communication professionals are increasingly found within government ministries. Based on classic work on bureaucracy and recent literature on mediatization and personalization, this article develops two ideal types: the government information provider and government spin doctor. These ideals are constituted by six dimensions: recruitment criteria, values, loyalties, reputational concerns, interactions, and tasks. A study of nonpartisan communication professionals in Norwegian ministries is used to illustrate the empirical relevance of the ideal types. The analysis shows that for loyalties and reputational concerns, Norwegian communication professionals resemble the government information provider. Regarding interactions and tasks, they resemble the government spin doctor. For recruitment criteria and values, the picture is mixed. The empirical application thereby illustrates a fruitful aspect of the framework as certain configurations will bring forth inbuilt tension in communication professionals' role. The framework allows a fine-grained approach to extend ongoing debates of appropriate and inappropriate practices of communication professionals in ministries.

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1 | INTRODUCTION

In popular debates, notions of the professionalization of political communication have often spurred critical discussions on so-called *spin doctors*: actors who are said to routinely exploit their dominant position as news providers, convey persuasive and deceitful messages, and manipulate the media to boost politicians' public image (Esser et al., 2001; Garland, 2017; Strömbäck & Kioussis, 2011). Such attention on spin doctors reflects the increasing importance of communication professionals in government, accentuated by the broader processes of mediatization. Over the last decades, political organizations (including ministries and government agencies) have increasingly adapted to generic news formats, prioritized media work over other tasks, and spent more resources on professionalized, proactive communication, making politics deeply mediatized (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008). Governments and public agencies have professionalized communication, expanded their communication units and moved them upward within the organization (Garland, 2017; Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Sanders & Canel, 2013), and also the number of ministerial advisors (e.g., politically appointed special advisors) working in government ministries with media-related issues has increased (Garland, 2021; Hustedt et al., 2017; Karlsen & Kolltveit, 2022; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2018).

One consequence of these developments is complaints about ruthless spin doctors. Complaints, not only heard from journalists, politicians and career bureaucrats (Garland, 2021), but also from within academic circles, where scholars have warned against increasingly blurred boundaries between communication professionals and political leaders (Johansson & Nygren, 2019) and undue politicization of civil servants (Aucoin, 2012; Grube & Howard, 2016). The critical narrative of political spin can potentially distort scholarly insight into the precise role and wider consequences of the increasing number of communication professionals who are found within public bureaucracies.

Communication professionals have long received attention within the public relations (PR) and corporate communication literatures (Dozier, 1992; Lee et al., 2015; Leichty & Springston, 1996), but were long largely ignored within public administration scholarship. In recent decades, however, an emerging stream of empirical studies has documented how communication professionals in public bureaucracies perform multiple tasks across different jurisdictions (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Ruijter, 2017; Sanders & Canel, 2013).¹ One line of study has analyzed the main tasks and daily work of communication desks in public ministries and agencies (Fisher, 2017; Pallas et al., 2016; Sanders & Canel, 2013; Schillemans, 2012; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014), with emphasis on media management and mediatization, reputation management and crisis communication (see Figenschou et al., 2021, for overview). Another line has emphasized the dual character of government communication professionals in balancing impartial information and promoting political leaders (Édes, 2000; Garland, 2017, 2021; Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Johansson & Raunio, 2020; Liu et al., 2012). Although, the academic interest in the communication professionals in public bureaucracies is growing, there has been little scholarly agreement on what defines nonpartisan communication professionals in government ministries today, and theoretical concepts and perspectives to guide this area of empirical work have been scarce. Aiming to provide an analytical framework to capture the complexities and variations of the communication professional in government, we ask: *how can we conceptualize contemporary communication professionals in government ministries?*

This article builds on classic work on bureaucracy (Olsen, 2008; Overeem, 2010; Weber, 1968; Wilson, 1887) and more recent research on the professionalization of communication and media work in public bureaucracies (Fisher, 2017; Sanders & Canel, 2013), to theoretically develop two multidimensional ideal types of nonpartisan communication professionals in government ministries: the *government information provider*, which harmonize with the Weberian bureaucrat, and the *government spin doctor*, representing a new politicized and strategic communication ideal. The ideal types are hypothetical concepts formulated to serve as analytical tools for empirical investigation, and as elaborated in the theoretical section, they are analytical constructs that do not necessarily reflect an empirical average, or desirable goals. They are constituted by six key dimensions that together characterize the complexities of government communication professionals: recruitment criteria, bureaucratic values, loyalties, reputational concerns, professional interactions and tasks. By using the ideal types as the outer poles on the continuum, the

multidimensional framework opens for comprehensive analysis of communication professionals and enables the identification of whether and where politicization pressures may occur, thus supporting a more fine-grained approach to move beyond simplified discussions of “political spin” in government communication.

In the second part of the article, a study of nonpartisan communication professionals in Norwegian ministries is used to illustrate the empirical relevance of the suggested ideal types. This first empirical application of the multidimensional framework is based on surveys and interviews with Norwegian communication professionals, and surveys of civil servants from other expert departments. The empirical study is included to illustrate one way of operationalizing the framework, but we emphasize that it can be applied using a wide range of methods and data in most politico-administrative contexts. Further, the empirical analysis is included to demonstrate how the multidimensional conceptualization enables fine-grained analysis of the contemporary communication professional role, further how it can help (future) research identify where, when and to what extent politicization pressures occurs in more precise and less dogmatic manners.

2 | GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS: KEY DIMENSIONS

An ideal type is a simplified analytical framework, a heuristic device that can be utilized to study and clarify empirical realities (Hekman, 1983; Swedberg, 2018). It does not necessarily reflect an empirical average or the statistical mode, nor represent a desirable objective. It is rather a construction in which the typical characteristics of a phenomenon are idealized/exaggerated and highlighted. We should therefore not expect to find ideal types in pure form in empirical reality. Rather, by comparing the ideal type with reality, that is, examining how empirical realities differ from the ideal type, we can learn more about the phenomena. The ideal types we formulate therefore serve as standards and an analytical framework to capture the complexities and variations of communication professionals in government.

We base our ideal types on the tradition following classical theorists on bureaucracy such as Wilson and Weber. In this perspective, civil servants should be hired based on their merit and formal education, loyally execute and implement the decisions of elected politicians, and carry out their duties anonymously and dispassionately (Weber, 1968; Wilson, 1887; Overeem, 2010, 75–77).

Building on the literature in this Weberian tradition, we identify recruitment criteria, values, and loyalties as particularly relevant dimensions to conceptualize the background and attitudes of bureaucratic actors. Moreover, we argue reputational concerns, professional interactions, and actual tasks carried out are additional dimensions essential to understand the precise role of bureaucratic actors in modern day governments. From these six dimensions, we build the two ideal types, the *Government Information Provider* and *Government Spin Doctor*. The *Government Information Provider* end on each dimension is based on classic work on bureaucracy (Overeem, 2010; Weber, 1968; Wilson, 1887). The *Government Spin Doctor* end on each dimension is the negation of this ideal, and is based the body of work on mediatization (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008), personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010), government communication and spin doctors (Esser et al., 2001; Fisher, 2017; Garland, 2021; Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Liu et al., 2012; Sanders & Canel, 2013). Below, we elaborate on each dimension.

The first dimension is *recruitment criteria*. Recruitment criteria—the objective criteria of skill and training in selecting job applicants (Gusfield, 1958)—are important in classical accounts of bureaucracy. Civil servants should be employed based on their merit and formal education and not based on their family name or connections (Weber, 1968), and the administration should be a body of “thoroughly trained officials” (Wilson, 1887). Historically, the emergence and growth of bureaucratic institutions increased the reliance on merit-based recruitments (Silberman, 1993). The meritocratic principle of recruitment remains important in bureaucracies across the world today, hiring the best candidates based on the level of and results obtained through formal education (Dahlström et al., 2012). In recent decades, however, practical knowledge derived from journalism or PR have been foregrounded as essential for communication professionals (Esser et al., 2001), and political appointed communication

advisors have predominantly been recruited based on professional practice in PR and media (Garland, 2021). The rationale here is that media competence build on implicit and unquestioned conventions rather than explicitly stated principles (Cook, 1998), and hence that practical experience trumps formal education. The two criteria of recruitment have different strengths and weaknesses which make it relevant to map studying government communication: Communication professionals recruited on formal education can lack the *fingerspitzengefühl* required in mediatized politics and risk being left redundant by policy professionals or not being able to meet the demands from their political and administrative leaders (Garland, 2021). Communication professionals recruited from the media or PR industry can lack necessary institutional insights into the norms and principles of public bureaucracies, and ignorant of administrative norms risk blurring the lines between politics and administration (Johansson & Nygren, 2019). More fundamentally, hiring based on professional practice and networks may directly challenge the meritocratic principle. To conceptualize the variation in recruitment of communication professionals in government ministries, we propose a continuum where *the government information provider* ideal type is recruited based on formal higher education and *the government spin doctor* is hired owing to their hands-on practical media-political experience.

The second dimension concerns professional *values*. Values can be defined as different conceptions of what is desirable that give direction to people's thoughts and actions, and values guide behavior related to their professional roles (Jørgensen, 2006). This dimension therefore stipulates the standards for behavior, and role perceptions and values have become a central research topic in public administration scholarship (Christensen, 1991; Egeberg & Trondal, 2018; van der Wal et al., 2011). In the classic Weberian bureaucracy, core values are professionalism, ethical consciousness and legality (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). The growing importance of media in recent decades has resulted in mediatization processes where government has become more attentive to the media (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). Hence, values such as public responsiveness (i.e., that civil servants comply more willingly with public demands) and media concerns (i.e., that civil servants are concerned about how issues appear in the media) has gained importance (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007, 365; Karlsen et al., 2020). Communication professionals with traditional bureaucratic values will probably be able to function seamlessly in government ministries. Communication professionals emphasizing media and public responsiveness might encounter value conflicts with the other civil servants in the organization in which they work. To capture the variation in the values of communication professionals, we propose that *the government information provider* is guided by classic traditional bureaucratic values, while *the government spin doctor ideal type* is not bound by these traditional values, but are guided by values related to media and public opinion.

The third dimension concerns *loyalty*. Loyalty can be defined as the willing and practical dedication of a person to an object (De Graaf, 2011, 289). Loyalty, like values, can be understood as standards for behavior. However, here we distinguish it as a separate dimension because it defines more clearly attitudes towards certain "objects." Loyalty has been a key concept in public administration scholarship (Hood & Logde, 2006). According to the classics on bureaucracy, civil servants' loyalties are expressed through the execution of policy decisions, and civil servants in the Weberian mold should be loyal to superiors in the hierarchical organization of bureaucracies (see below) and loyally execute the *decisions* of their political masters (Overeem, 2010, 76–77). The personalization of politics and the media (Karvonen, 2010), has arguably increased loyalty to *the individual minister* (Figenschou et al., 2017), not restricted to the organizational implementation of political decisions. Communication professionals emphasizing loyalty to their administrative superiors (and to the political decisions) might experience dilemmas when administrative and political leaders in the ministry disagree. Communication professionals emphasizing loyalty to political leaders might be alienated in their cooperation with expert departments. To conceptualize the variation in the loyalties of communication professionals in government ministries, we propose a continuum where *the government information provider* ideal type has a hierarchical loyalty to administrative and political decisions, while *the government spin doctor ideal type* is mainly loyal to the individual minister.

The fourth dimension is *reputational concerns*. This dimension captures concerns about how actions and behavior are perceived by outside audiences. More than loyalties, reputational concerns capture civil servants' concerns when their objects of loyalty appear in the media or in public. We therefore distinguish it as a separate dimension. The

traditional literature on bureaucracy does not explicitly address the question of reputation. However, more recent literature on bureaucratic reputation has underlined how public sector organizations are concerned about their reputation and try to avoid negative exposure (Busuioc & Lodge, 2016; Maor, 2020), as a strong *organizational* reputation can be used to generate support from a variety of external stakeholders (Carpenter, 2002; Carpenter & Krause, 2012). In recent decades, the interventionist reporting methods of modern media has increased attention and scrutiny on public sector organizations (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Strömbäck, 2008). In addition, personalization of politics implies that public attention increasingly is placed on individuals at the expense of political parties and other political organizations; good press coverage is imperative for contemporary politicians and media attention is used strategically for individual advantage (Blumler & Esser, 2018; Figenschou et al., 2017; Grube, 2015; Karvonen, 2010). As a consequence, reputations of the *individual leaders* have become increasingly important within in public bureaucracies. Communication professionals concerned about the reputation of the ministry can be blind for reputational threats towards their minister, whereas communication professionals too concerned about the reputation of their minister can be drawn into blame games (Hood, 2011) when difficult stories about the minister appear in the press. To conceptualize this variation in the reputational concerns of communication professionals in government ministries, we propose a continuum where *the government information provider* ideal type is mainly concerned about the reputation of the ministry, while *the government spin doctor* ideal type is mainly concerned about the reputation of the individual minister.

The fifth dimension is *professional interactions and relationships*. Professional interactions and relationships are not widely studied in the public administration literature, but are nevertheless important for us in this context. More precisely, in the classic model of bureaucracy, the hierarchy of offices is a key feature, where lower offices are under the control and supervision of higher offices (Weber, 1968). The central government apparatus is typically organized in ministries that are divided into different sections under the authority of departments, which again are under the control of a permanent secretary and the minister herself (Christensen et al., 2018). Communication professionals can be integrated in these different departments, giving expert communication advice related to the specific policy areas, with professional interactions and relationships within the hierarchical structure. The mediatization of government ministries in many systems, however, have resulted in separate communication units and moved them upward within the organization (Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Sanders & Canel, 2013), to the extent that they are part of the team around the minister at the top of the organization, working long hours in close relations to the minister and her team of ministerial advisors (Garland, 2017). To conceptualize the variation in professional interactions and relationships of communication professionals in government, we position *the government information provider* ideal type located within the hierarchal structure of the bureaucratic organization, interacting mainly within their unit and with the immediate superior, having a formal and detached relationship to the political leadership and the minister. *The government spin doctor* ideal type work in a team removed from the hierarchal structure of the bureaucratic organization as part of the entourage around the minister and the political leadership, with close interactions and professional relations primarily with the minister as well as ministerial advisors.

The sixth dimension is the *tasks* carried out by communication professionals. The classic works on public bureaucracies stress how administrative tasks in public ministries are underpinned by rules and expert knowledge, based in codes and classifications to secure the classic bureaucratic ethos of integrity and impartiality (Olsen, 2008; Tilly, 2006). As public organizations, ministries are guided by the classic bureaucratic ethos of integrity and impartiality (Olsen, 2008). In terms of communication this implies that the daily work of government communication professionals should be a citizen-centered public service guided by regulations and norms of correctness, transparency, accountability and privacy protection (Édes, 2000; Fisher, 2017; Liu et al., 2012; Sanders & Canel, 2013). In their multiple tasks, communication tasks seek equal treatment and transparent interactions regulated by official communication policies and guidelines (Johansson et al., 2019), stressing the need to share information openly with all interested stakeholders, including the media (i.e., in press releases, open press conferences and, increasingly, via in-house channels or through social media). Recent studies mapping communication plans and policies, however, find markedly few concrete, formalized regulations on government communication, which gives communication professionals

TABLE 1 Two ideal types of communication professionals

	Government spin-doctors	Government information providers
Recruitment criteria	Practical experience from media or political organizations	Formal education, formal degrees
Values	Little emphasis on traditional values, more aware and responsive of media and public opinion	Emphasis on only traditional bureaucratic values
Loyalties	Not primarily loyal to the organization, but mainly loyal to the individual minister	Hierarchical loyalty
Reputational concerns	Mainly concerned about the reputation of the minister	Mainly concerned about the reputation of the ministry
Interactions and relationships	Situated in a team removed from the hierarchal structure of the bureaucratic organization as part of the entourage around the minister and the political leadership, with close interactions and professional relations primarily with to the minister as well as ministerial advisors.	Situated within the hierarchal structure of the bureaucratic organization, and have interactions and relationships restricted by this hierarchical structure.
Tasks and assignments	Minister spin, pitching stories selective and proactive	Inform citizens, answer media requests unselective and reactive

extensive professional latitude in their daily work (Garland, 2021; Sanders & Canel, 2013; Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). To meet the requests from a rapidly changing news media landscape and meet the ambitions of a growing corps of politically appointed ministerial advisors, communication professionals increasingly work with strategic communication and promotion of the ministry and minister, primarily reflecting the *political* nature of government ministries (Garland, 2021). Strategically motivated key tasks include pitching favorable stories, off-the-record background briefings and controlled leaks to selected reporters (for a comprehensive discussion, see Figenschou & Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Johansson et al., 2019). To conceptualize the variation in the tasks of communication professionals in government, we argue that *government information provider ideal* type mainly work with tasks related to public information (guided by administrative rules and expert knowledge), the *government spin doctor* mainly work tasks related to promoting the ministry and minister (guided by strategic evaluations and persuasion).

The six dimensions are summarized in Table 1.

3 | EMPIRICAL APPLICATION

In the second main part of the article, we apply the analytical framework formulated above in a study of communication professionals in Norwegian ministries.

3.1 | Research context

Norway is a parliamentary democracy with a merit-based central bureaucracy divided among 16 ministries. Although the Norwegian government apparatus is characterized by a high degree of stability, some important changes have taken place over the past decades. As seen in several other Western democracies, structural devolution has shifted responsibility for executing certain tasks to regulatory and service-producing agencies, streamlining ministries as support structures for cabinet ministers, and making civil servants attending more to the daily needs of the political

leadership (Christensen et al., 2018). The number of political appointees has grown, and cabinet ministers are now assisted by one political adviser and one or two state secretaries (junior ministers) (Askim et al., 2017). There are no government-appointed spokespersons or central press offices. Instead, ministers, in cooperation with their political appointees and communication unit, handle communication concerning their areas of responsibility. Although Norway has not witnessed the same process of centralization of government communication and increased importance of entities like the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) as other systems (Johansson & Raunio, 2020; Marland et al., 2017), the heads of communication have regular meetings and communication professionals at the PMO (seek to) coordinate government communication during major events or crisis.

Norway is a highly mediatized government (Figenschou et al., 2017; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014) which makes it a particularly well-suited case to illustrate how the role of government communication professionals play out in a media-oriented public bureaucracy. In Norwegian ministries, communication units have grown from 30 communication professionals in the early 1990s to about 120 across the 16 ministries in 2019. As seen in many established democracies, this growth can be explained by the increasing need to respond to the media and be visible in the press, both for ministers and ministries. The communication desk is placed beneath the ministry's top administrative and political level but somewhat at the side of the hierarchical pyramid. Communication professionals are civil servants (they are not politically appointed) and hence, like other nonpartisan civil servants, are expected to act professionally and be politically neutral (Christensen, 2005).

3.2 | Method and data

The empirical application draws on two main data sources. First, web surveys were distributed to all communication professionals working in ministries and all civil servants from five ministries. The survey enables us to operationalize and map the six dimensions elaborated above quantitatively, and further, to investigate if the empirical patterns relate only to communication professionals or are expressions of overall developments in the civil service as a whole, we compare communication professionals to civil servants on applicable dimensions. Second, we conducted qualitative interviews in the ministry with the highest response rate to collect thicker descriptions of particularly the task dimension. As the work of media and communication specialists in government can be hard to discern (Garland, 2021, 54), mixed methods are essential to capture their precise role. Below, we elaborate on the two main data sources.

3.2.1 | Survey

The communication professionals' e-mail addresses were collected from the government website. The e-mail addresses of regular civil servants are no longer publicly available online, so all the ministries were approached to negotiate access, and five (out of 16) ministries (the Ministry of Defence; Ministry of Finance; Ministry of Health; Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Research; and Ministry of Education) provided e-mail lists. Overall, we have no reason to expect that the five ministries are considerably different from the remaining 11 ministries. Online survey tools provided by Questback were used to design and administer the survey in late 2015 and early 2016. After four reminders were sent out, the response rate was 40% (mean) from both the ministries ($n = 660$) and the communication workers ($n = 49$).

We measure *recruitment criteria* based on survey items about the respondents education and professional background. We operationalize *values* with four items and *loyalties* with three items. The operationalization of values and loyalties build on previous longitudinal studies of civil servants in Norwegian ministries and agencies (Christensen et al., 2018) but was somewhat adjusted after pretesting in order to measure values and loyalty more explicitly. We operationalize *reputational concerns* with items about what respondents find important with media coverage of

organizations and certain actors. We measure *interactions and relationships* in the survey with items related to contact patterns: how often respondents had contact with different actors in a professional capacity. We measure *tasks and assignments* with two items. See the Supplementary Online Appendix for a description of all survey items and variables included in the analysis.

3.2.2 | Qualitative interviews

To supplement the surveys, 21 semistructured qualitative interviews were conducted with civil servants and political leaders in one of the ministries studied.² One of the authors conducted interviews with communication workers (Communications 1–11), state secretaries and political advisers (Politicians 1–4) and expert bureaucrats (including the secretary general and department heads, Experts 1–6). This interview sample covers the entire communication team and political leadership, along with selected leaders in the expert departments. Interviewing political and administrative elites, can provide unique insights into the corridors of power—as interviews can give access to the power elites' reflections and evaluations of the phenomenon studied, and their insider accounts of their professional role and practice (i.e., Lilleker, 2003). At the same time, a critical approach is particularly important when interviewing elites (Dexter, 2006/1970), as the participants in this interview study are skilled communicators, and thus better able at framing the interviews to benefit themselves than nonelite interviewees. In this study, one of the authors had observed the communication practices in the ministry over a period of 3 months gaining extensive insights into the practices of government communication. Based on the unique access gained from the fieldwork, the same ministry was chosen for interviews. Moreover, it was the ministry with the highest response rate in the survey (sent out during the observation period). It is a ministry with relatively high number of media requests and a media-oriented political leadership typical for the Norwegian government (see Figenschou et al., 2017).

The interviews enable us to study the daily work of government communication professionals in more detail, including division of responsibility, formal guidelines, practices and routines. The interview guide also covers the communication desk's professional relations and interactions with the expert department, political leadership and the media, in addition to the internal cooperation among communication professionals. Although the interviews touch upon all the six key dimensions, it has a thematic emphasis on the tasks and professional relationship dimensions. All authors were involved in both the development of the interview guide and the survey questionnaire, and the interview data were coded and analyzed by two of the authors. The interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min and were recorded and transcribed by a research assistant. For the current article, all interview segments on the daily tasks of government communication professionals and their professional interaction with expert departments, political leaders and external actors (i.e., media) were analyzed to better understand if and how these daily practices challenge their roles as nonpartisan communication experts. Extracts from the interviews were translated from Norwegian, and all direct statements used in the analysis were approved by the interviewees. To preserve the interviewees' anonymity, the interviewees' exact titles are not given. For the sake of transparency, the interviewees are referenced only by the professional categories to which they belong and by an assigned number.

4 | COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS IN NORWEGIAN MINISTRIES

In this section, we analyze Norwegian communication professionals along all six dimensions to illustrate how the framework can be applied in empirical analysis. On each dimension, we relate communication professionals to the ideal type specified above, and further compare communication professionals with other civil servants to investigate if the results are specific to communication professionals or part of overall developments in the civil service.

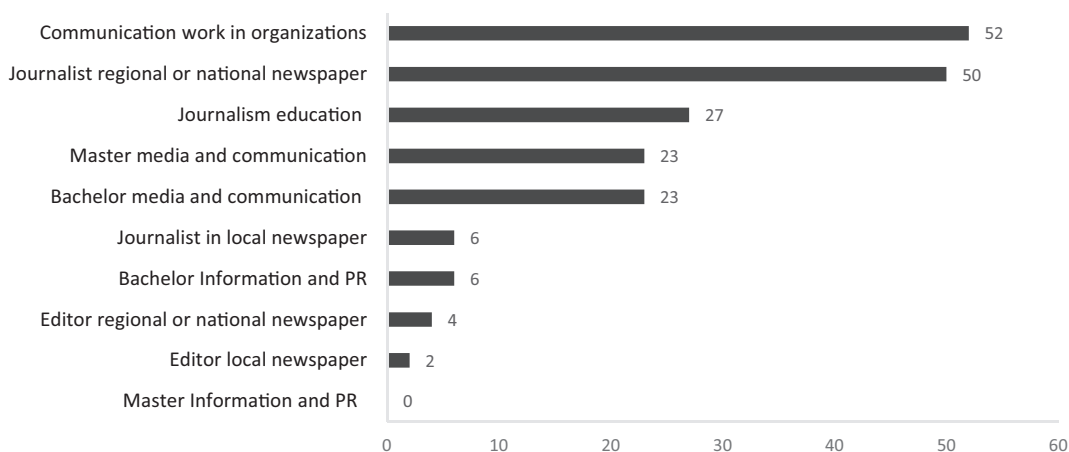


FIGURE 1 The educational background and work experience of communication professionals. Percent. $n = 48-49$. Categories are not mutually exclusive. The figures indicate the proportion with the relevant background

4.1 | Recruitment criteria

Figure 1 shows that a majority of the communication professionals have relevant experience from working with communication in an organization and/or worked as journalists in regional or national newspapers. If we combine all types of professional experience (communication work, journalist (national/regional/local), editor (national/regional/local)), 71% have this type of background.²

Regarding education, 27% have a formal education as journalists (bachelor's degree), and about one quarter have a bachelor's degree or a master's degree in media and communication studies. A small minority have degrees from information and PR studies. If we combine all types of education in communication (master/bachelor communication, master/bachelor information and PR), 51% have a formal degree in communication. If we also include journalism, 65% of communication professional have some type of formal communication/journalism degree.

We also asked about the highest level of education, regardless of discipline, and 55% of communication professionals have a master's degree from a university. Overall, this indicates that government communication professionals to some extent are hired based on practical experience in media and communication, rather than formal education. Indeed, such practical experience seems less part of general developments in the Norwegian civil service. As many as 80% of the ordinary civil servants have a master's degree, with social sciences and law being the most common areas of education.

Still, practical experience and formal higher education are not mutually exclusive: Half of communication professionals with relevant communication experience (the 71% identified above) have a degree in communication, and all of them have some sort of formal university education (bachelor's or master's degree). Concerning recruitment criteria, Norwegian communication professionals are therefore not positioned clearly towards either the government information provider or the government spin doctor end of the continuum. Rather, they seem to be placed somewhat in the middle, between the two ideal types on this dimension.

4.2 | Values

As Figure 2 shows, communication professionals emphasize traditional bureaucratic values (lawful proceedings and professional standards) to a great extent, lending little support to the notion that Norwegian communication professionals are positioned towards the spin doctor end of the continuum on this dimension. Still, they emphasize media

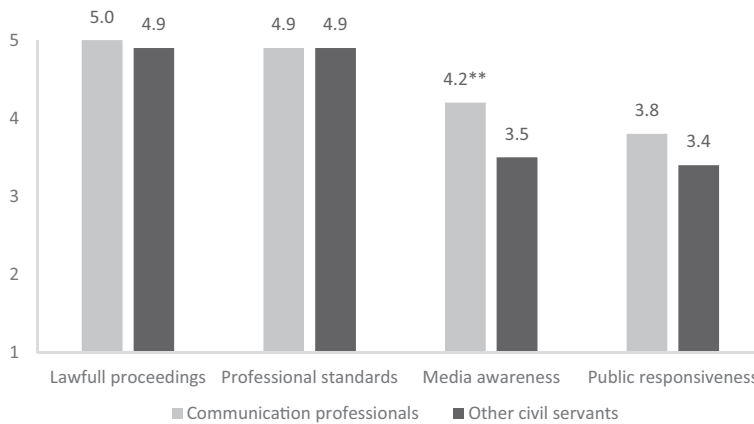


FIGURE 2 Values: Communication professionals and other civil servants. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5. **Difference between communication professionals and other civil servants is significant at $p < 0.01$ level. Question: How important are the following values, norms, and considerations for you as a civil servant? Five-point scale (not important at all, less important, neither nor, quite important, very important). Communication professionals ($n = 44$ – 48) and civil servants ($n = 655$ – 658)

awareness and public responsiveness as well. This is not a general tendency in the civil service, communication professionals rate media awareness as significantly more important compared to the other civil servants. How the emphasis on media impacts on the traditional bureaucratic values, how the different values are balanced, and whether they sometimes collide in practice, is difficult to investigate through the survey and will therefore be addressed in the qualitative part of the analysis.

Norwegian communication professionals emphasize classic bureaucratic values to a great extent suggesting they are positioned towards the government information provider end of the continuum. However, these values are followed by their high media awareness and public responsiveness, which pull them towards the government spin doctor pole on the value dimension.

4.3 | Loyalties

Figure 3 shows the extent to which communication professionals and other civil servants deem these different loyalties important. The communication professionals indicated that loyalty to their immediate superiors, to the political leadership, and to the cabinet in office is of great importance to them. Again, lending little support to the notion that Norwegian communication professionals are clearly positioned towards the spin doctor end of the continuum. Compared with other civil servants, the communication professionals reported same levels of loyalty to their superiors and to their political masters (differences not significant).

4.4 | Reputational concerns

Figure 4 shows that communication professionals are more concerned about the reputation of the ministry than the reputation of the individual minister. Communication professionals are the least concerned about the minister's party. Overall, this lends little support to the notion that Norwegian communication professionals are clearly positioned towards the spin doctor end of the continuum. Again, the main picture is quite similar for communication professionals and other civil servants (although communication professionals are significantly less concerned about the

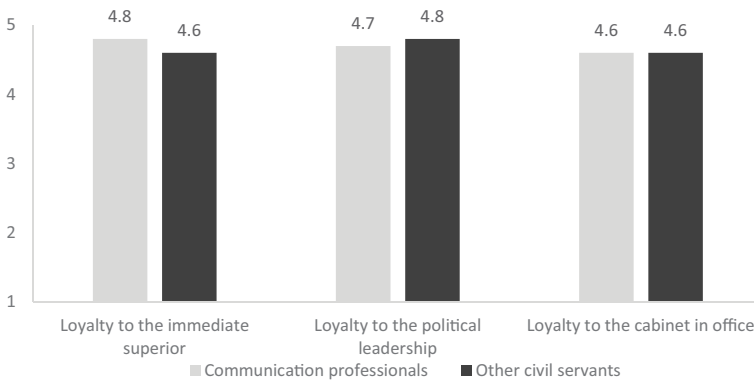


FIGURE 3 Loyalties. Communication professionals and other civil servants. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5. Question: How important are the following values, norms, and considerations for you as a civil servant? Five-point scale (not important at all, less important, neither nor, quite important, very important). Communication professionals (n = 44–48) and civil servants (n = 655–658)

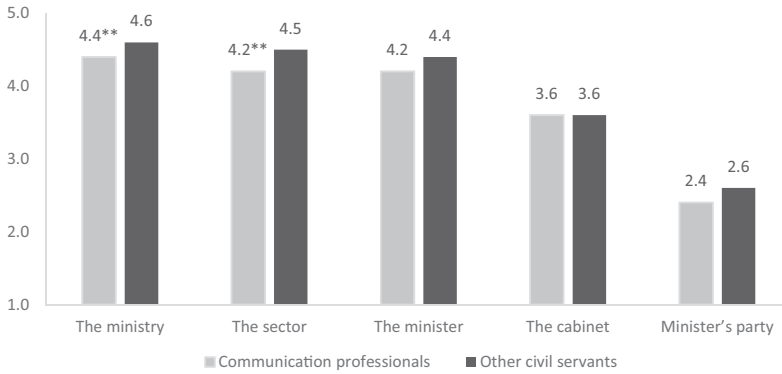


FIGURE 4 Reputational concerns: communication professionals and civil servants. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5. **Difference between communication professionals and other civil servants is significant at $p < 0.01$ level. *Difference between Communication professionals and other civil servants is significant at $p < 0.05$ level. Question: Regarding media reports that deal with your organization's policy areas, how important do you think it is that. Five-point scale (not important at all, less important, neither/nor, quite important, and very important). Communication professionals (n = 44–46) and civil servants (n = 620–648)

ministry and sector compared to other civil servants). It is possible that real-life situations will present communication professionals with dilemmas where the reputations of both the ministry and minister might be at stake—and perhaps also in conflict—but the survey data do not capture how these reputational concerns are balanced when in conflict. Furthermore, it is worth noting that civil servants in general are more concerned about how different actors appear in the media than the communication professionals are.

Based on reputational concerns, communication professionals are positioned towards the government information provider ideal.

4.5 | Professional interactions and relationships

Figure 5 shows that the communication professionals in Norwegian ministries indeed work very closely with the ministers. Over half the respondents have direct contact with the ministers on a daily basis (some several times a

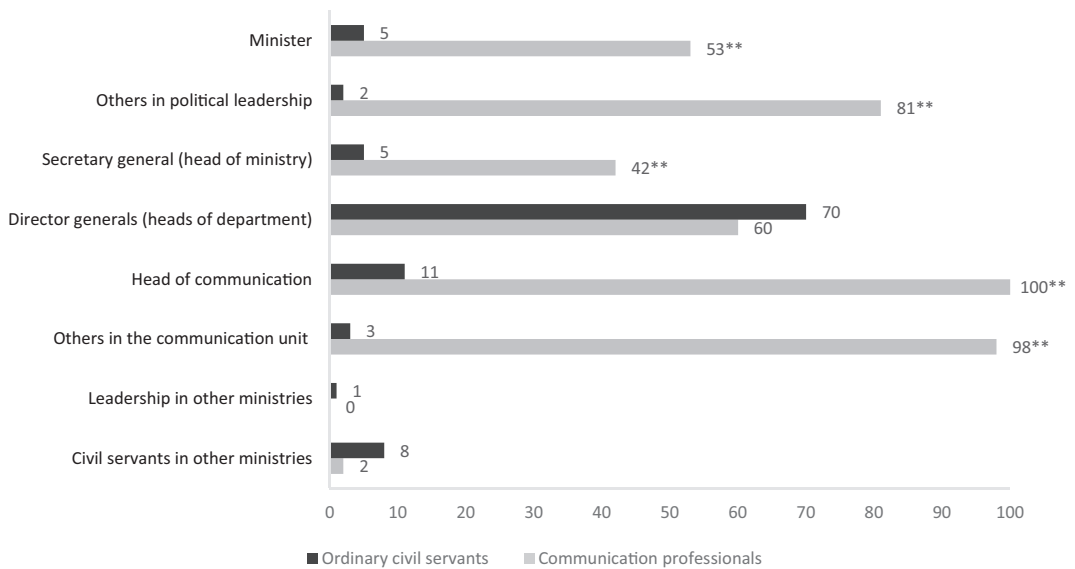


FIGURE 5 Interactions. Communication professionals and civil servants. Proportion that has contact with other actors every day. **Difference between communication professionals and other civil servants is significant at $p < 0.01$ level. Communication professionals ($n = 44-46$) and civil servants ($n = 620-648$)

day). The communication professionals also frequently see other actors in the ministry's political leadership (state secretaries and political advisers), as well as administrative department heads. This indicates that communication departments are closely integrated with the political actors and are positioned high in the organizational hierarchy. On this dimension, Norwegian communication professionals are positioned towards the spin doctor end of the continuum. This conclusion is supported when comparing with civil servants. Highly frequent contact with the minister and political leadership is not typical in the Norwegian civil service, and the contact patterns of communication professionals clearly deviate from those of other civil servants. In this case, hierarchical interactions prevail, and civil servants typically have most frequent contact with the heads of their department.

4.6 | Tasks and assignments

As demonstrated in Figure 6, Norwegian communication professionals have quite complex work.³ First, they handle inquiries from journalists (inquiries that often concern interview requests of the minister) and prepare different media initiatives. They further prepare the minister and political advisors on talking points, the handling of acute issues, monitor the media, and accompany the politicians to various public engagements. To some extent, they also pitch stories about policy/ministry affairs to the media and inform the public about what is happening with the ministry.

The survey also asked communication professionals about their reasons for contacting journalists. Here, practices closer to the government spin doctor side are emphasized, particularly the practice of pitching exclusive news stories to journalists and presenting policies they want attention about (see Figure 7).

A complex pattern emerges from the analysis of the survey data: communication professionals have both professional experience and formal education, they emphasize traditional bureaucratic values, they are loyal to their immediate superiors, and are concerned about the reputation of the ministry. On the loyalty and the reputational concerns dimensions, they therefore resemble the government information provider ideal. However, regarding the



FIGURE 6 Weekly assignments: communication experts. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5. Question: Can you estimate how much of a regular work week you spend on the following specific tasks? Four-point scale, no part, a small part, a large part, a very large part (n = 45-47)

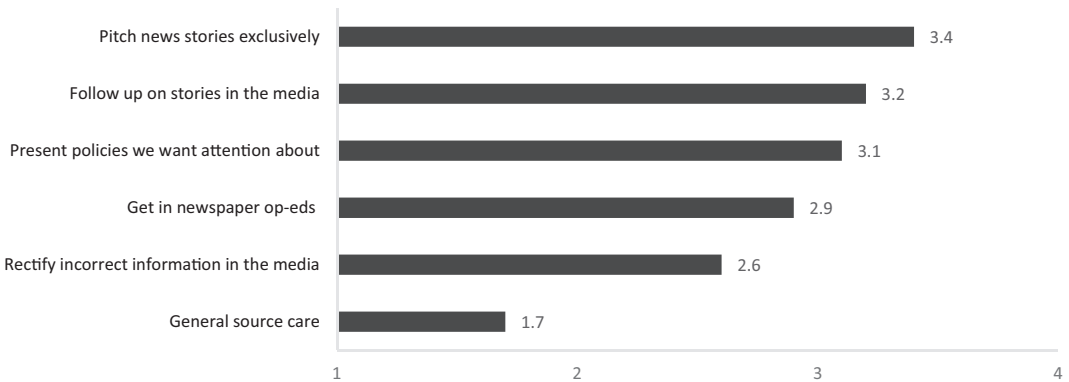


FIGURE 7 Reasons for contacting journalists: communication professionals. Mean on a scale from 1 to 5. Question: To what extent is your contact with journalist about? Five-point scale (not at all, to a small extent, to some extent, to a large extent, to a very large extent) (n = 38-39)

interactions and tasks, they are closer to the government spin doctor end of the continuum. In the next section, we zoom in on these dimensions.

4.7 | Government communication practices in mediatized government

The qualitative interviews illuminate the daily practices of government communication professionals and offer further insights into the complexity of this role in a time of mediatized governments.

The interviewees on the communication desk emphasized that they both provide public information (primarily on the ministry website, partly on social media), advise and facilitate the communication of ministry policy (primarily in the news media, partly on social media). All interviewees underlined their adherence to traditional bureaucratic values and pointed to the boundary between the tasks they considered partisan and those that are considered non-partisan. At the same time, however, most of the communication professionals referred to gray zones and increasingly blurred boundaries and politicization pressures. Many stressed that the communication desk should not get

involved in election campaigning (i.e., organizing campaign events) or partisan politics (i.e., promoting political parties). In terms of concrete tasks, this implies that communication professionals should not contribute communication advice (i.e., provide background information, talking points, training or advice) for politicians to use within the party organization or party context, nor should this be done for partisan purposes. Similarly, communication professionals should refrain from organizing meetings between the political leadership and other party politicians.

Most of the interviewees indicated that expectations related to tasks and their daily communication practices can challenge these boundaries. For one thing, the very task of communicating on behalf of the ministry and media-oriented politicians implies using compelling, strategic and personalized communication to gain media attention. Although communication professionals communicate on behalf of the ministry (the organization), several explained that they adapt to the politicians in office. One interviewee, who had experience in both expert departments and on the communication desk, illustrated this position:

On paper, I provide facts to the political leadership, but in practice, I end up writing about everything the previous government did wrong [...] We have routinized all these boundaries ... But in what we write, I write like I am a politician for the party the minister represents ... It is complicated, and a clear boundary cannot be drawn; it is a continuous valuation. (Communication 6)

Moreover, several interviewees stressed that changes in the media sector and more media-oriented politicians have increased the emphasis on proactive communication and promotional initiatives: "When I started, the ministry's main task was to provide a comprehensive, balanced, factual background [to substantiate policies]. We still do, but there has been a marked shift ... Now, one of our main tasks is to help, at all times, the ministers in office to succeed with government policy" (Expert 2). The emphasis on the promotion of government policies is the most prominent at the communication desk:

When I worked in the expert department, I rarely ever felt that my position as a civil servant was under pressure, but I feel such conflicts here. I have had to take a stand multiple times to state that this is above and beyond what I can do as a civil servant. As the communication desk expands, we will feel it to a greater extent [...] The messages we deliver are becoming politicized. (Communication 11)

This tendency is related to the extensive use of proactive exclusivity strategies to gain media attention. When asked to elaborate on how exclusive pitches to selected reporters correspond to the role of communication professionals in government, the interviewees often argued that this is the only strategy for getting government information out to the broader public, as illustrated in the following statements:

In many cases, when we invite newsrooms and reporters, they are not interested unless they get the story exclusively [...] So, if we give everyone the same story at the same time, no one will cover it, and the total news attention and publicity decreases. (Communication 7)

Assessment of how to gain media attention is based on practical experiences from working as communication professionals and from the interviewees' practical backgrounds from the media sector. The following statement exemplifies how the communication professionals strategize to maximize media attention but also how they mark the boundaries in these endeavors as nonpartisan civil servants:

The minister was promoting this new policy. We had planned how he was going to present it and prepared facts and background, briefs on difficult questions, and so on [...] But to pitch it to the main political debate show, it was necessary to use the fact that this was a [politically] contested topic.

Pitching such a conflict with political opposition was outside of my responsibilities, so all I could do was to ask the political adviser to carry it out. (Communication 8)

Such role negotiations are further intensified by the communication professionals frequent contact with the political leaders and new tasks such as managing the ministers' public appearances and travels. Indeed, communication professionals are highly involved in the organization of politicians' travels but cannot be involved in the partisan aspects of it (i.e., meetings with local politicians). However, communication professionals often find themselves in a situation where what is correct according to the mandate and what is most efficient diverges, a practical dilemma illustrated in the following statement: "We need to be conscious of these issues, but we also need to find practical and time-saving solutions" (Communication 1). Communication professionals experience that they sometimes are given tasks outside of their mandate because of time pressures (if politicians find that involving the party organization is too cumbersome). In these pressing situations, communication professionals may find that it is more efficient to carry out the partisan communication tasks themselves:

It can be challenging in practice [...] I inform the expert departments, I contact the sector, and I contact other communication staff, but I do not deal with the political aspects. But sometimes, in the everyday time crunch, the political advisers are overworked and forget their roles [...]. And when traveling, local politicians contact me about practicalities all the time. I should not be involved, but at the same time, I have this information and, sometimes, we just have to accommodate. (Communication 4)

Some stressed that working closely with the political leadership—outside of the administrative hierarchy—over time brings the politicians in office and the communication experts closer together: "We are part of the civil service, and we are an expert department in a way, *communication experts* [...], but we obviously work much closer together with the political leadership than the expert departments" (Communication 2).

The interview data show that communication workers, in contrast to the other departments, not only work physically closer with the political leadership, but also function outside of traditional administrative hierarchies, often in close cooperation with the minister and political advisers; they are in frequent contact, travel together, have lunch together and go through hardships together, to such an extent that communication professionals get to know the politicians and the ministers' political views, which may, again, make it more convenient to push the communication in a personalized and partisan direction.

In essence, from the interview data, it is apparent that although the interviewees position themselves near the government information provider pole when explaining their loyalties and reputational concerns, they also problematized this position when they elaborated on interactions and tasks (pushing them towards the government spin doctor pole of the continuum). Overall, the gray zones highlighted in the interviews are seldom regulated or formalized in communication plans or policies. Hence, media management is largely practice-driven in the Norwegian government context, and boundaries are challenged as practices gradually change over time and vary between different governments and ministers.

4.8 | Lessons from the empirical application

The application of the conceptual framework on Norwegian ministries gives some empirical insights worth summing up, before we return to the conceptualization in the concluding discussion. First, communication professionals in Norway resemble the *government information provider ideal* in their reported values, loyalties and reputational concerns, while they resemble the *government spin doctor* to a greater extent in regard to professional interactions and tasks. Further, the comparison with other civil servants shows that these are not general trends that characterize

the civil service as a whole. Second, in the Norwegian case, politicization pressure seems to be connected to professional interactions and relationships (how communication professionals work very closely with the political leadership) and related to this—the daily tasks of communication professionals (how they pitch stories to selected reporters, by playing on news values such as personalization, conflict, etc.). By zooming in on the daily work of communication professionals the empirical application illustrate how communications professionals operate in “gray zones” and how time pressure, stress and lack of concrete formalized guidelines can give room for and over time develop “politicized” practices although this conflicts with their self-perception as civil servants. The empirical application therefore illustrates a fruitful aspect of the suggested framework as certain configurations will bring forth inbuilt tension in communication professionals' roles.

5 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

The mediatization of politics, rise of policy professionals and expansion of communication units in modern government have brought a new type of actor to public bureaucracies: the communication professional. In this article, we have sought to conceptualize this role in public bureaucracies, as it is influenced and positioned between classic bureaucratic ideals and the ideals of the expanding group of policy professionals. To underline the inbuilt span in the role of communication professionals today—the current article has formulated two ideal types—the *government information provider* and the *government spin doctor*.

Based on extant studies of communication professionals in government, we build each ideal type along six key dimensions (recruitment criteria, bureaucratic values, loyalties, reputational concerns, interactions, and tasks) which together constitutes essential elements of the complex role of contemporary government communication professionals. The practices and inbuilt dilemmas in government communication are much discussed in the literature (i.e., Fisher, 2017; Figenschou et al., 2017; Garland, 2017, 2021; Johansson & Nygren, 2019; Sander & Canel, 2013; Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014), but a comprehensive systematization and conceptualization has so far been lacking.

The conceptualization has three overarching implications for public administration and political science scholarship. First, it demonstrates the complexity of this new type of civil servant, and based on the ideal types we seek to foreground and make more explicit how it is influenced both by an administrative and a political rationale. Second, the multidimensional framework is designed to invite comprehensive analysis of communication professionals and enables the identification of whether, where and to what extent politicization pressures may occur, thus supporting a more fine-grained approach to extend the ongoing debates of appropriate and inappropriate practices of communication professionals. Third, the framework also refines the criticism of the “ruthless spin doctor,” a denunciation often voiced by journalists, political opponents and career bureaucrats (who by blaming “spin doctors” can distract attention away from their own involvement in the backstage production of political news) (Garland, 2021). Communication professionals can work in very close proximity to their political masters and have highly politicized tasks, and simultaneously have experience, attitudes and loyalties associated with a traditional Weberian merit based bureaucracy. This way the multidimensional analytical framework can both identify politicization pressure and identify how and where government communication professionals are (more) resilient to mediatization and politicization pressure.

Based on extant international research, we argue these dimensions are relevant in studies of communication professionals across countries, although the relative importance of the different dimensions as potential nodes of politicization is a question for empirical enquiry. Over time, employed in future studies in other contexts and examined through other methods, it can provide more precise insight into where politicization pressure occurs and whether some dimensions are more vulnerable to politicization than other across systems or whether this is primarily explained by cross-national variations. The six dimensions could also be used as an additive index, although more case studies are needed to establish the weight given to the specific dimensions. Further, future empirical applications and theoretical elaborations should also seek to complement and expand the framework, if and when other key

dimensions are identified. Particularly, dimensions that capture the attitudes and practices of government communication professionals related to social media, as well as further investigation of their professional networks (within and beyond their organization), will complement and expand the ideal types suggested in this article.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

INFORMED CONSENT

Respondents gave their consent through a designated question at the start of the survey. Respondents gave their informed consent through a designated question at the start of the electronic survey.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We use the generic term “communication professionals” to refer to nonpartisan civil servants involved in government communication in ministries. Other studies have used “civil servant communicators,” “information officers,” or “professional and press officers” (see among others Garland, 2017; Johansson & Nygren, 2019).

² Many of the surveyed communication professionals have several types of professional experience.

³ The survey items on tasks and assignments were very role specific and therefore not comparable for communication professionals and civil servants.

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