

CHAPTER II

Communication  
advisers in public  
bureaucracies:  
Inhabitants of the  
zone between politics  
and administration

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## ABSTRACT

*According to the Weberian ideal, civil servants should be employed based on merit and competence. Unlike politicians, civil servants should carry out their duties anonymously and without passion. Increasingly, over the last few decades, in response to the constant need to respond to the media and be visible in the press, non-partisan communications professionals have been employed in ministries across Western democracies. Although hired as civil servants, these actors often work to defend the minister and secure favourable press for both the minister and the ministry, raising concerns about politicisation of the civil service. The chapter reviews the work of communication professionals in public bureaucracies. Drawing on electronic surveys of communication advisers, ministerial advisers and civil servants, the chapter argues that communication advisers in Norwegian ministries are not quite civil servants, not quite politicians. Rather, they are a different type of civil servant functioning in the intersection, or zone, between political leadership and line departments.*

*Keywords: advice, competence, communication advisers, civil servants, ministries, politics-administration dichotomy, politicisation, public bureaucracies, Weber, Wilson.*

## INTRODUCTION

According to Max Weber, civil servants should be employed based on merit and competence. Unlike the visible and dedicated politicians, civil servants should carry out their duties anonymously and without passion (Weber, 1971; Overeem, 2010, p. 75–77). Their loyalties should be expressed through their execution of policy decisions. While Weberian and Wilsonian ideals prescribe a clear separation of politics and administration, it is well established that reality is often blurred. Politics and administration are not separate spheres, but rather closely intertwined, although to varying degrees in different countries (Lee & Raadschelders, 2011), making the terms *hybrids* (Aberbach et al., 1981) or *village life* (Peters, 1987) more accurately descriptive. Several studies have identified a politicisation of public bureaucracies, whereby civil servants are politically responsive and act in ways that threaten their impartiality (Aucoin, 2012; Maley, 2017; Mulgan, 2007).

Over the last few decades, *communications advisers* have increasingly been employed in ministries across Western democracies as a response to the constant need to respond to the media and be visible in the press. Although hired as civil servants, many are former journalists and work to defend the minister

and secure favourable press for both the minister and the ministry. This chapter reviews communication advisers in light of the politics-administration dichotomy and the concept of politicisation. More specifically, we ask: Are they a special breed of civil servants? Are they more (functionally) politicised than ordinary civil servants? We answer these questions by looking closely at what communication advisers do and what kinds of advice they give. We draw on surveys of communication advisers, ministerial advisers and civil servants in Norwegian ministries. Empirical comparisons with ministerial advisers and civil servants suggest that non-partisan communication advisers are not quite civil servants, not quite politicians. They are a different type of civil servant functioning in the intersection, or zone, between political leadership and line departments.

In the remainder of this chapter, we first review the literature about the politics-administration dichotomy and the manifold meanings of the politicisation concept, and then give an overview of the existing literature on communication advisers. After the Norwegian context is briefly introduced, the chapter analyses Norwegian communication professionals, drawing on survey data. Finally, the chapter discusses the emergence of communication professionals as a new type of civil servant in relation to the Weberian dichotomy of politics and administration.

## THE POLITICS-ADMINISTRATION DICHOTOMY AND PROCESSES OF POLITICISATION

The politics-administration dichotomy is one of the older chestnuts of public administration scholarship. The thoughts of a separation, or distinction, between politics and administration has been discussed by several classical theorists. In his 1887 classic, “The study of Administration”, Woodrow Wilson wrote about the field of administration as “removed from the hurry and strife of politics (...) Politics is (...) the special province of the statesman, administration of the technical official.” According to Wilson, “administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics.” (...). Administration should be “[a] body of thoroughly trained officials serving during good behaviour” and it was the “[s]teady, hearty allegiance to the policy of the government they serve” that constituted this good behaviour.

In one of his famous lectures, Max Weber also made the distinction between politics and administration (1919/2004). According to Weber, administration should stay out of politics (Overeem, 2005, p. 316). Administrators should abstain from fighting: “To take a stand, to be passionate – *ira et stadium* – is the politician’s element” (Weber 1919/2004, p. 54). According to Weber, “The

honor of the civil servant is vested in his ability to execute conscientiously the order of the superior authorities (...) even if the order appears wrong to him (...). Without this moral discipline and self-denial, in the highest sense, the whole apparatus would fall to pieces" (Weber 1919/2004, p. 54).

According to Svava, the "distinction stressed by Wilson and Goodnow hardened into a dichotomy around the 1920s (1999, p. 678). Over time, the politics-administration dichotomy has been the subject of extensive discussion. In a (more) recent debate, Overeem linked the dichotomy to the concept of non-interference and suggested separating politics (as the power to make decisions) and policy (the content of these decisions) (2005). Although administrators will be involved in policy, the dichotomy implies that administrators should not be involved in politics (selection of elected officials) (Overeem, 2005). In response, Svava argued that administrators *do* sometimes get involved in elections; for instance, when they help defend their minister. Furthermore, administrators have an impact that goes beyond policies through decisions about resource use (who gets jobs, contracts, promotions). Svava also distinguished between non-interference and political neutrality; while the former involves "avoidance of action", the latter is assertive and sometimes includes "speaking truth to power" (2006, p. 125).

Scholars like Rutgers and Svava have been advocates for symbolising the relationship between elected officials and public administrators as a continuum rather than a dichotomy (Rutgers, 1997; Svava, 1985; 1999). There are overlapping roles and reciprocal influences between elected and administrative officials. In the words of Mouritzen and Svava, "One does not find separate spheres of politics and administration but rather a fusion of political and administrative influences" (2002, p. 257). Similarly, Alford, Hartley, Yates and Hughes (2017, p. 755) talked about a "shared space between politicians and public managers, rather than one in which politicians inhabit one realm and public managers a separate one". In their 1981 classic, Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman visualised the relationship between politics and administration as four images, from a clear separation of spheres to the pure hybrid and the disappearance of the Weberian distinction. In a fourth image, Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981) mentioned Janus-faced ministers and super bureaucrats. Rhodes (2011) suggests the term "political-administrators" as a generic descriptor for ministers and top departmental officials alike, reflecting their shared set of beliefs and traditions.

An understanding of the dynamics of political-administrative relationships can also be found in Jacobsen (2003; 2006). He suggested viewing the relationship between the political and the administrative spheres as a variable, thereby opening up the possibility "that it may vary among contexts, position in the formal structure, demographics, and over time" (Jacobsen, 2006, p. 303). Draw-

ing on surveys of politicians and administrators in 30 Norwegian municipalities, Jacobsen found that the overlap between the political and administrative spheres is mainly a phenomenon “delimited to the political and administrative apex” (2006, p. 317). In the Norwegian local government context, harmony and cooperation mainly characterise the interaction between politics and administration (Jacobsen, 2003).

The process of politicisation contributes to a breaking down of the distinction between politics and administration. Overarchingly, politicisation can be seen as a desire for control (Peters & Pierre, 2004), which can be achieved through political influence over recruitment, more specifically “the substitution of political criteria for merit-based criteria in the selection, retention, promotion, rewards, and discipline of members of the public service” (Peters & Pierre, 2004, p. 2). Such an understanding of the concept of politicisation has been called direct or formal politicisation (Rouban, 2004; Peters, 2013). Eichbaum and Shaw (2008) called it administrative politicisation to capture the relationship with the civil service: Ministerial advisers can prevent professional advice from the civil service from reaching the minister’s ear (procedural administrative politicisation) or intervene and colour the advice given (substantial administrative politicisation) (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2008). In the literature, the civil servants’ party-political activity has been called functional politicisation. In their typology of different politicisation mechanisms, Hustedt and Salomonson (2017) traced such an understanding back to Mayntz and Derlien (1989) and Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman (1981). Functional politicisation means that civil servants anticipate and integrate politically relevant aspects into their recommendations and contribute through political-tactical advice. Such an understanding of the concept of politicisation implies a changed balance between party political neutrality and political loyalty (Dahl Jacobsen, 1960). Although it is expected from the role that bureaucrats should be responsive to their political leaders, functional politicisation means that a limit has been exceeded. As Mulgan emphasised, [Functional politicisation] “marks the crossing of a line between proper responsiveness to the elected government and undue involvement in the government’s electoral fortunes. The term is inevitably slippery in meaning because the line itself is often blurred and hard to draw (...)” (Mulgan, 2007, p. 570–571).

Seen through the politics-administration lens, administrative politicisation is a question of affecting the interaction or workflow between the two spheres. Functional politicisation is a question of increasing the overlap between the two spheres and moving towards a hybrid.

In this chapter, the empirical focus is on “non-partisan communication advisers” working at the communication desk in the ministries. We thereby

delineate “ministerial advisers” (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007a; LSE GV314 Group, 2012; Wilson, 2016), as the persons “appointed to serve an individual minister, recruited on political criteria, in a position that is temporary” (Hustedt et al., 2017). By definition, therefore, non-partisan communication advisers are not ministerial advisers. In reality, however, they could possibly fulfil the same function and provide the same type of advice as ministerial advisers.

### COMMUNICATION ADVISERS IN PUBLIC BUREAUCRACIES

In response to the demand for access from media outlets and ministers’ publicity needs (Falasca & Nord, 2013), contemporary governments and public agencies have professionalised communication and expanded their communication units with communication advisers across Western democracies (Heffernan, 2006; Sanders & Canel, 2013). These non-partisan communication advisers have different names across different jurisdictions. In the UK, for instance, they are called “communications specialists” or “information specialists” (Garland et al., 2018). Communication advisers are civil servants with special skills and are often recruited from the journalism domain, although public relations, marketing and other social science backgrounds are also common (Jacobs & Wonneberger, 2017; Sanders & Canel, 2013).

Some studies have provided insight into the daily work of communication advisers in public bureaucracies. In their study of press officers in the European Union Council, Laursen and Valentini (2013) found the communication activities to be apolitical, impartial and of a reactive nature. The press officers did not have a particular agenda, did not take sides and never favoured particular angles (Laursen & Valentini, 2013, p. 5). Their background notes and press releases were written in a bureaucratic and fairly neutral language and were very predictable in terms of both content and form (Laursen & Valentini, 2013, p. 5). The press officers in the EP were labelled “impartial information providers”, giving politically unbiased accounts of what went on in the EP (Laursen & Valentini, 2014, p. 9). Édes (2000) found that in Central and Eastern Europe, they monitor media coverage, brief and advise political officials, manage media relations, inform the public directly, share information across the administration, formulate communication strategies and campaigns and research and assess public opinion. Liu, Horsley and Yang (2012) found that in the US, daily communication activities could be grouped among media interaction, public information, communication planning and research and multimedia communication.

In the UK, government press officers maintain a challenging balancing act between impartial information and party-political statements. “[G]overnment

press officers must negotiate a difficult path between the need to inform citizens about the government's programme and demands by ministers to deploy privileged information to secure and maintain personal and party advantage in the struggle for power" (Garland, 2017, p. 171). According to Garland, it has become "harder for government press officers to resist political influence over government communication" (2017, p. 183). Garland's study also showed how UK press officers can be put in a squeeze between political and administrative actors in the ministry. "Marginalised by the wider civil service, government press officers struggled to accommodate a clash of interests between bureaucratic and party-political values" (Garland, 2017, p. 183–184).

Other studies show how communication advisers in ministries become part of internal turf battles. In Northern Ireland, for instance, "the interdepartmental competition between ministers has infiltrated information dissemination, leaving the Government Information Officers (GIOs) to compete with other ministries to try and get [...] stuff in the papers" (Rice & Sommerville, 2016, p. 102). A large amount of time is devoted to protecting their minister and ministry "at all costs", often being in open warfare with other ministries (Rice & Sommerville, 2016, p. 102).

According to Garland (2017), the increased political responsiveness of civil servants can be seen as adaptations to changing media environments. Garland argued that in order to manage reputational risk, politicians seek control over the communications function of public bureaucracies. Officials anticipate growing political interference by responding more directly to ministerial media priorities (p. 175). "[M]inisters become increasingly concerned to exert greater control over media representation while government press officers increasingly identify with and serve the ministers particular needs" (p. 184).

Empirically, this chapter focuses on what Norwegian communication advisers do and the kind of advice they give. The Norwegian case is of interest because of the strong meritocratic principle and the presence of written guidelines banning civil servants from party-political work.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT, METHODS AND DATA

Norway is a parliamentary democracy with a merit-based central bureaucracy divided among 16 ministries. Although the Norwegian government apparatus is characterised by robustness and a high degree of stability, some important changes have taken place over the past few decades, most notably an increased number of both political appointees and nonpartisan communication professionals in ministries (Christensen et al., 2018). Cabinet ministers are now assisted by one political adviser and one or two state secretaries (junior

ministers). Official statements from ministries are channelled through the cabinet minister and his or her political appointees. However, working with the media and communicating is not the only designated task for politically appointed state secretaries and political advisers. There are no government-appointed spokespersons or central press offices. Instead, ministers, in cooperation with their political appointees and communication unit, handle communications concerning their areas of responsibility. In Norwegian ministries, communication units have grown from 30 communication professionals in the early 1990s to about 130 three decades later. Over the same period, ordinary civil servants in the ministries have grown from about 3,500 to 4,500. Currently, there are on average eight communication professionals in each ministry. The communication desk is placed beneath the ministry's top administrative and political level but somewhat to the side of the hierarchical pyramid. However, communication professionals are civil servants, are not politically appointed, and, like other nonpartisan civil servants, are expected to act professionally and be politically neutral (Christensen, 2005). In Norway, there are written ethical guidelines banning all civil servants from participating in political campaigning.

To review the work of Norwegian communication advisers, we draw on three different surveys conducted in 2015: a survey of state secretaries and political advisers from the Bondevik 2 and Stoltenberg 2 cabinet (response rate 73 percent, 207 individual responses), a survey sent to civil servants in five ministries (response rate 40 percent, 661 individual responses) and a survey sent to communication advisers across all ministries (response rate 40 percent, 49 individual responses). The surveys were conducted as part of two large research projects (see also Askim, Karlsen & Kolltveit 2017; Figenschou, Karlsen, Kolltveit & Schillemans 2019). The items utilised in this chapter particularly concerned the type of advice given.

## ANALYSING COMMUNICATION ADVISERS IN NORWEGIAN MINISTRIES

We look first into the work of communication advisers. Asked to rate the most important role within the communication department, three main roles seem most important for Norwegian communication advisers: to provide communication advice, to be the main contact point for the media and to be the web editor. Fewer are designated speech writers or handle internal communications.



**TABLE 11.1:** Work of communication advisers. Question: What is your most important role within the communication department?

Role	Share
Communication advising	32.6%
Media contact	23.3%
Web editor	20.9%
Leadership tasks	7.0%
Speech writer	7.0%
Other	7.0%
Internal communication	2.3%
n	43

To be able to do their jobs and fulfil their roles, communication advisers draw on different skills and competences. The ability to get things done is deemed most important by communication advisers (and by civil servants), as shown in Table 11.2. Understanding how the media works is clearly more important for communication advisers than it is for civil servants from expert departments. This is not surprising, given that the communication advisers are placed and work in departments with designated communication tasks. Furthermore, it is quite important for communication advisers to be able to make tactical-political judgements. Here, the differences from ordinary civil servants are actually quite small.

**TABLE 11.2:** Competence, communication advisers and civil servants compared. Mean and standard deviation. Question: How important is the following competence in your position? Five-point scale (not important at all [1], not so important, neither/nor, quite important, and very important [5]).

Competence	Communication Advisers <sup>1</sup>	Civil Servants <sup>2</sup>
Implementation ability, the power of action	4.94 (.25)	4.55 (.67)
Ability to understand how the media works	4.81 (.53)	3.40 (.99)
Ability to collaborate across disciplines, levels of government, organisations and sectors	4.81 (.40)	4.55 (.68)
Tactical-political judgment	4.04 (.88)	3.87 (.97)
n	47–48	523–536

Comparing the type of advice provided by communication advisers and ordinary civil servants further shows a clear division of labour. Communication advisers quite often provide councils on how, when and where policies should be presented in the media. Civil servants only do this occasionally. As many as 40 percent of the civil servant respondents in fact opted for the “do not know” category, suggesting this type of advice seldom comes from the expert departments. The political leadership seldom gets advice from communications advisers about *which* policies should or should not be presented in the media, suggesting a limit to the political involvement of these actors.

**TABLE 11.3:** Comparing media advice from communication advisers and civil servants. Mean and standard deviation. Question: 1) How often do you give the following type of advice to political leadership about ... 2) How often do you supplement professional assessments with advice on ... Five-point scale. (Never [1], occasionally, quite often, very often, always [5]).

Type of advice	Communication Advisers <sup>1</sup>	Civil Servants <sup>2</sup>
<i>How</i> policies should be presented in the media	3.02 (1.01)	2.01 (.93)
<i>When</i> policies should be presented in the media	2.96 (1.04)	1.78 (.86)
<i>Where</i> policies should be presented in the media	3.06 (1.01)	1.40 (.67)
Which policies <i>should</i> be presented in the media	2.27 (1.09)	NA
Which policies <i>should not</i> be presented in the media	2.16 (1.06)	NA
n	44–47	467–478

Turning to the political actors in Norwegian ministries, communication advisers clearly offer something other than what state secretaries and political advisers do. These two political actors, to a larger extent, provide political-tactical advice on single issues and long-term political advice to their minister. However, both communication advisers and political advisers are important to give ministers advice in handling urgent media issues.

**TABLE 11.4:** Comparing the type of advice from MAs and communication advisers. Mean and standard deviation. Questions: 1 How important is it to give the following type of advice to your minister? 2 How important is it to give the following type of advice to political leadership? Five-point scale (Not important at all [1], less important, neither nor, quite important, very important [5]).

Type of advice	State Secretaries <sup>1</sup>	Political Advisers <sup>1</sup>	Communication Advisers <sup>2</sup>
Political-tactical advice on single issues	4.50 (.71)	4.32 (.81)	3.16 (1.41)
Long-term political advice	4.26 (.85)	4.06 (1.066)	2.79 (1.37)
Advice in handling urgent media issues	4.07 (1.00)	4.32 (.84)	4.35 (.97)
N	136–138	66	43–47

Overall, the different types of advice suggest communication professionals offer something different from ordinary civil servants and state secretaries and political advisers. They provide important advice on how, when and where policies should be presented, and are the in-house experts when difficult issues appear in the media.

Furthermore, the surveys reveal that communication advisers are more closely integrated with the political actors in the ministry than are civil servants. Asked to rate the claim that they were on “first-name terms with people in the political leadership in the ministry”, 89 percent ( $n = 46$ ) stated that it was a “quite good” or “perfect match”, according to their own work experience. Forty-six percent of the civil servant respondents said the same ( $n = 534$ ). Besides demonstrating a close integration between the political leadership and communication advisers, it also testifies to the informal character of work within Norwegian ministries in general. Working closely over time, somewhat outside of the administrative hierarchy, brings the communication advisers and the political leadership closer together. Despite their closeness to politicians, the communication advisers still see themselves as civil servants. Asked to rate the claim, “As a communications adviser, I do not feel part of the civil service”, 87 percent ( $n = 47$ ) reported it was a “quite poor” or “very poor match”.

Turning to the degree of functional politicisation, the surveys did not give clear answers. Asked to rate the claim, “In our department, we often get tasks of a party-political nature”, 85 percent ( $n = 47$ ) reported it was a “quite poor” or “very poor match”. Only 62 percent of civil servants ( $n = 492$ ) said the same. This could suggest that civil servants in fact are more politicised than their colleagues in the communication unit. Using responses from ministerial

advisers as indications, however, there is little reason to believe that. According to them, the head of the communication unit and the secretary general contribute equally via political-tactical advice (mean = 2.79 and 2.62, respectively), and both expert departments and the communication unit equally protested, “when asked to give advice on issues of a party-political nature” (mean = 3.77 and 3.59, respectively).

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this chapter, we have analysed communication advisers in light of the politics-administration dichotomy and the concept of politicisation.

We have drawn on several surveys of communication advisers, ordinary civil servants, state secretaries and political advisers in Norwegian ministries. Norwegian communication advisers have three main roles: They provide communication advice, are contact points for the media and are web editors. By comparing them to other civil servants and looking at their competence and type of advice given, we have tried to determine if they should be seen as a special breed of civil servants. We find that the ability to understand how media works is clearly more important for communication advisers than it is for ordinary civil servants working in line departments. Furthermore, there is a clear difference in the type of media advice, in *how*, *when* and *where* policies should be presented. The latter type of advice is not something that is the responsibility of ordinary civil servants. This division of labour found in Norwegian ministries seems natural, given that communication advisers are hired in communication units to work with the press, while ordinary civil servants work in expert departments.

Furthermore, by comparing communication advisers to political actors in the ministry, our results show they are clearly not politicians. Communication advisers provide different advice than do state secretaries and political advisers – less political-tactical advice on single issues, and (clearly) less long-term political advice, which is the main responsibility of political appointees. Instead, communication advisers give advice on how to handle urgent media issues (mainly together with political advisers).

In this chapter, we have also tried to determine if communication advisers are more (functionally) politicised than ordinary civil servants are. Unfortunately, the survey items were not very well suited to answer this question. More communication advisers than civil servants disagreed with the claim that their departments have tasks of a party-political nature. However, this could also mean that communication advisers and civil servants have somewhat different conceptions of what constitutes party-political tasks. Using ministerial advisers

as expert witnesses to the functioning of the executive government suggests that heads of communication units and secretaries generally contribute equally through political-tactical advice, and both expert departments and the communication unit equally protested “when asked to give advice on issues of a party-political nature”.

In modern-day bureaucracies, it is not only a question of politicians and administrators; to be more precise, there are several types of actors. In Westminster systems, ministerial advisers have been called a “third element” (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007b; Shaw & Eichbaum, 2015). Based on this study, we conclude that non-partisan communication advisers function as a fourth element in Norwegian ministries. This group is distinctly different from ordinary civil servants and ministerial advisers, with super bureaucrats (Aberbach, Putnam & Rockman, 1981) or political-administrators (Rhodes, 2011) perhaps being more descriptive terms.

Over time, new roles in political-administrative systems will arise or thrust themselves forward, either by defining existing positions differently or creating completely new positions (Dahl Jacobsen, 1960). According to the classic works of Norwegian political scientist Knut Dahl Jacobsen, this was for instance, the case when the state secretary position was established in Norway. The constant need to respond to the media and be visible in the press has created a need for a special type of civil servant across Western bureaucracies – communication advisers. This relatively new type of civil servant is not quite civil servant, not quite politician.

Although communication advisers are increasingly found in public bureaucracies in several countries, few true comparative efforts have been made. A notable exception is the edited volume of Sanders and Canel (2013), which focused on the structures and processes of government communication. Future research should strive to investigate the competence, type of advice and daily work of communication advisers across different jurisdictions, building on a common framework to fully understand the impact these new actors have in modern-day bureaucracies.

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