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research article

A comparative analysis of senior civil servants' involvement in media management

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This article offers results of a comparative case study into how pressures from the media translate into the involvement of senior civil servants (SCSs) in media management and how this is reflected in differentiated ways in politico-administrative relationships. It offers tentative explanations for these differences through the lens of 'public service bargains'. Based upon a qualitative analysis of documents and 62 interviews with SCSs and advisers in Denmark, Sweden and the UK, the research found that: (i) media management, in some countries, generates an extension and an amplification of the normative expectations towards SCSs' involvement in media management; (ii) this is accompanied by a revitalisation of the reflections from SCSs to balance their responsiveness to the minister with anonymity and neutrality when involved in media management; (iii) an extensive formal politicisation seems to curb pressures on SCSs' anonymity and neutrality and their involvement in media management. These findings improve our knowledge of SCSs' involvement in media management by raising crucial questions about the political neutrality of administrators, tendencies towards politicised governance and (more) interventionist political staffers – amid intensified pressures from the media on governments.

Keywords media management • neutrality • anonymity • senior civil servants • public service bargains • media influence • political legitimacy • government

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Introduction

Politicians and civil servants operate within a media-saturated environment. This has strained traditional politico-administrative relationships (Mulgan, 2007; Grube, 2019)

from a number of directions. Internally officials must be willing to offer advice vis-à-vis media management while at the same time maintaining clear boundaries in their relationships with elected ministers, while (externally) safeguarding public trust in their neutrality and maintaining some element of bureaucratic anonymity. Research investigating exactly how civil servants manage media pressures remains in its infancy (Garland, 2017: 172, Schillemans and Pierre, 2016: 1–2). However, understanding whether and under which conditions civil servants can respond to requests for advice and assistance in managing the media from ministerial masters is critical. Not only does it raise questions about institutional adaptation, administrative impartiality and (de)politicisation it also focuses attention on the difference between (traditional) *policy advice* and an increasing demand for *media-advice*. When set against a broader socio-political context which is increasingly defined by concerns about anti-political sentiment (Flinders, 2020), fake news (Grube, 2019), post-truth politics (Garland, 2021), populism and ‘democratic backsliding’ (Yesilkagit et al, 2024) the direct contribution of information or explanations by senior civil servants (SCSs) to the public, as opposed to from ‘lying’ politicians (Burley, 2024), may have significant implications in terms of perceived legitimacy, credibility and confidence for both the civil servants as well as governments and their institutions.

Governments responses to media pressure have not gone unnoticed. Research on government communication, its centralisation (Johansson and Raunio, 2020), professionalisation (Sanders and Canel, 2013) or the mediatisation of government organisations (Figenschou et al, 2019) has been published and has provided important insights into how governments’ organisations are changing due to a changing media context. Further, nascent research reveals rather mixed findings in terms of whether involvement in media management challenges civil servants’ neutrality (Liu et al, 2012; Rice and Somerville, 2017; Garland, 2017; Jacobs and Wonneberger, 2017; Schillemans et al, 2019; Kolltveit, 2021) pointing to the complexity inherent in the role of press officers (Figenschou et al, 2022). The mixed findings further suggest that contextual factors in different politico-administrative systems may provide for different challenges for such servants’ media management roles.

This article adds to the nascent research on how politicians’ attentiveness to the media translates down and is absorbed by the bureaucracy in ways that alter or reshape relationships with SCSs. The research question investigated is: in a context of intense media pressure, how can the evolution of different relationships between ministers and SCSs across several politico-administrative systems be explained?

This article expands existing research as it takes a comparative approach, reporting a three-year qualitative case study of media management in governments in Denmark, the United Kingdom and Sweden, through lenses enabling a systematic investigation of how the media pressure translates into the relation between SCSs and their minister. The ambition is to begin to identify and to explain potential variations in how SCSs perceive being involved in media management and the pressures this put on SCSs in- and outside traditional Westminster jurisdictions, across governments with different organising principles and degrees of formal politicisation. While all three countries included have merit organised civil services, Swedish governments employ more politically appointed civil servants and advisers also for media management compared to the Danish and UK governments, which is why we expect media pressures to be less evident in Swedish SCSs’ perception of being involved in media management. Next to documents on civil servant normative foundation, the case study includes

accounts from those who are traditionally defined as SCSs, for example, permanent secretaries and permanent press officers/heads of press. While the role of permanent secretaries varies across countries, we consider them as well as press officers/heads of press as 'most-likely' permanent civil servants in terms of being involved in media management, which is why we do not expect substantial differences in their accounts.

Three specific intellectual reference points serve to position the contribution of this article. The first is Aucoin's thesis that SCSs are increasingly required to be 'promiscuously partisan', that is

to be publicly supportive, even enthusiastic, about their [the government's] agenda and to promote it in their consultations with stakeholders... To the degree that governments have this expectation of enthusiastic support, it goes beyond the traditional requirement of loyalty to the government of the day. It substitutes partisan loyalty for impartial loyalty. (2012: 189)

This article explores this thesis when investigating the potential loss of traditional assumptions of anonymity and neutrality.

This, in turn, flows into a second reference point and the critique noted by Grube and Howard (2016: 518) regarding the 'relative dearth of substantial evidence to back up claims of promiscuous partisanship and a collapse of administrative impartiality' (see also Grube 2014; 2015). This article takes an important step towards providing empirical investigations of whether and how the media pressure on ministers translates into changing normative expectations on the permanent civil service offering research that suggests a less passive bureaucratic stance, in contexts also beyond Westminster contexts, and instead highlighting forms of bargaining and reflections that often take place 'behind the scenes', well away from the media gaze.

Our final reference point, the work of Hood (2001; Hood and Lodge, 2006) on 'public service bargains' (PSBs) we utilise from a media management angle to disentangle the day-to-day interactions between SCSs and their ministers. This framework offers an approach to assess relationships as implicit and explicit bargains that deepens our understanding of anonymity and neutrality, and how these themes manifest themselves in the rewards, competencies, and loyalties between SCSs and their political principal (Hood and Lodge, 2006; Elston, 2017: 87).

Theory

Mulgan suggests that the pressures the media places on bureaucratic neutrality and anonymity are generated by the increasing attempt from government to perform media management, not least when subject for media scrutiny (2007), where SCSs are subject to political pressures to advocate or defend the behaviour of their political masters. This resonates with Aucoin's (2012) notion of the 'promiscuously partisan'. Grube's influential seam of scholarship (2014; 2015; 2019; Grube and Howard, 2016) offers the most thorough analysis of 'the dance of the promiscuous partisan' as it explores the arguably invidious position of SCSs in an increasingly aggressive and fast-paced media context. However, in this context, Grube identifies civil servants being 'constantly willing to examine their own beliefs and practices and calibrate them to perform their simultaneous duties of loyally serving the government of the day while remaining determinedly nonpartisan' (Grube and Howard, 2016: 530).

Grube's 2019 work engages directly with the core potential tension between how a decline in bureaucratic anonymity may lead to the politicisation of civil servants and yet also (critically) seeks to move beyond that perceived tension by suggesting that UK civil servants have themselves resolved this tension.

To some extent, existing research on how SCSs cope with the pressures emanating from increasing political demands vis-à-vis the media has always had an implicit focus on the notion of a 'bargain'. An example of this is when Figenschou and colleagues suggest that Norwegian governmental communication professionals balance loyalties, tasks and so on between ideal types of neutral information providers and more politically responsive spin-doctors (Figenschou et al, 2022). However, we suggest that the theoretical traction and analytical advantage offered by a PSB approach have not been fully realised.

The object of analysis of PSBs is the explicit or implicit agreements that governed the relationship between ministers and what is traditionally defined as their SCSs, that is civil servants positioned at the very top of governmental bureaucracies. These are defined as any 'explicit or implicit agreements between public servants – the civil or uniformed service of the state – and those they serve. The other partner in such bargains consists of politicians, political parties, clients, and the public at large' (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 6). PSBs can serve as a framework to identify different types of bargains across different politico-administrative systems as comprising different types of rewards, competencies and loyalties.

Of relevance in the repertoire of different types of PSBs as suggested by Hood and Lodge (2006) when investigating pressures towards SCSs' neutrality and anonymity are serial- as opposed to personal-loyal agency bargains.

For the reward part, in serial-loyal bargains, permanent SCSs are offered permanence, some trust from their ministers and anonymity including avoidance of public blame and request for accountability for the policy failures and political decisions ultimately decided by governments. Such rewards as initially formulated by Hood entail civil servants to remain neutral to ensure their permanence which makes them 'politically neutered' (2001: 15). Later scholars have, based upon empirical research on SCSs in serial-loyal bargains, suggested that also being 'close to politics' with the access to the minister and political conversations are considered rewarding (Salomonsen and Knudsen, 2011: 1031–3; Shaw and Eichbaum, 2020: 851). In personal-loyal bargains the rewards include extensive access to the advisory jurisdiction allowed for through a close and trusted relationship with the political principal (Hood, 2001: 16).

The competency dimension reflects the contributions that SCSs give, in terms of expected skills and knowledge (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 88). For the competence part, in a serial-loyal bargain, neutrality is reflected as a provision of *fachkompetenzen*, that is, specific policy expertise and technical knowledge (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 93). In contrast, personal loyalists are supposed to bring responsive competence, for example, including provision of advice on political tactics combined with a 'political nous' (Hood and Lodge, 2006: 100), from loyal and 'committed believers' sharing the minister's 'worldviews' and willing to do what it takes to realise the politician's policy preferences (Aberbach and Rockman, 1994: 466).

Contrary to the type of serial-loyal agency bargain traditionally associated with permanent civil servants devoting their loyalty to successive ministers, personal loyalists, traditionally associated with ministerial advisers, owe their loyalty to a specific minister (Hood, 2001: 16; Hood and Lodge, 2006: 21).

Table 1 summarises points from existing research on media management with the relevant dimensions within a PSB.

Table 1: Thematic priorities of public service bargains and their relevance to media management across PSB dimensions

Dimension	Question related to dimension	Thematic relevance to media management
Reward	Which rewards do SCSs get from the bargain?	<i>Have SCSs involved in media management lost their neutrality and anonymity? Do SCSs involved in media management enjoy access to the advisory domain of the minister resulting in a more personal trusting relationship with the minister? Is being involved in media management perceived as a reward enabling SCSs and heads of press to be 'close to politics'?</i>
Competence	What skill-set do SCSs require to fulfil their end of the bargain?	<i>Have SCSs involved in media management broadened their skill-set towards more responsive rather than neutral competencies as well as provision of public advocacy in favour of the policy of their political principals?</i>
Loyalty	To whom do SCSs grant their loyalty?	<i>Do SCSs involved in media management grant their loyalty to the specific minister and/or the government of the day (personal-loyalty) or to successive ministers and/or governments (serial-loyalty)</i>

Research design and data collection

The analysis departs from a qualitative comparative country case-study designed according to a most similar case design (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) to begin identifying tentative explanations for differences across cases. A most similar case design allows for a rigorous identification of explanatory variables as all factors identical across systems can be excluded. In the analysis, we compare Denmark and the UK with Sweden, as Denmark and the UK shares important similarities, while differing from the Swedish context, see Table 2.

First, all three countries have a merit bureaucracy, which is why all permanent civil servants are formally entering a serial-loyal bargain.

Second, empirical variation between Denmark and the UK versus Sweden are evident on two dimensions previously identified as relevant for being related to bureaucratic neutrality and behaviour (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014). First formal politicisation, that is, the extent of positions designated to be filled on political grounds, may affect the degree to which permanent SCSs are involved in political advice (Christiansen et al, 2016: 1240), as extensive presence of politically appointed advisers provides for an 'insulation effect' (Hustedt et al, 2017: 304). Whereas Denmark and the UK is modestly formally politicised (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2014), the Swedish system is extensively so. Both Denmark and the UK introduced special advisers (SpAds) exempted from the demand for party-political neutrality. In the period under investigation, there were around 30 SpAds in Denmark, two of whom were positioned in the Prime Minister's Office (PMO); in the UK there were 103 SpAds, around one third of which served in the PMO and in the Cabinet Office. In Sweden, ministerial advisers include political advisers (*politisk sakkunniga*) and press secretaries (*pressekreterare*). Politically appointed state secretaries are positioned at the apex, the Swedish bureaucracy being functionally equivalent to the Danish and

Table 2: Similarities and differences across the countries

	Denmark	United Kingdom	Sweden
Bureaucracy	Merit	Merit	Merit
Degree of formally politicised positions	Moderate	Moderate	Extensive
Organising principle for government	Ministerial governance	Ministerial governance	Collegial governance

Table 3: Overview of documents per country

Denmark	United Kingdom	Sweden
White papers and a code of conduct set out the norms for civil servants' behaviour (Ministry of Finance, 2004; 2015)	The Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance (Cabinet Office, 2014) Civil Service Code (2015)	The Communication Policy for the Government Offices (Prime Minister's Office, 2012)

British permanent secretaries. Since 2014, press secretaries are formally employed in the PMO's press unit. In the period under investigation, there were around 200 politically recruited actors (including 36 press secretaries).

Third, the countries vary according to the organising principle of governance, which may affect bureaucratic behaviour and role perceptions, including their loyalty orientation (Hustedt and Salomonsen, 2017).

The data includes first documents on the formal regulation of civil servants' media management, which allow one to access the explicit aspects of the bargain, see Table 3.

Second, 62 interviews were performed across the three countries, allowing for investigating perceptions of rewards, competences and loyalty and providing insights into the tacit aspects of the bargains (Elston, 2017: 86). The study includes what we traditionally define as SCSs, that is civil servants positioned at the very top of governmental bureaucracies, actors who have been the traditional object of both theoretical and empirical research on PSBs who already have the advisory domain as part of their habitat as well as those heading press or communication units, given that we investigate media management. It is expected that those two types of leading civil servants are the ones most involved in media management, which is why they represent 'most-likely' actors in terms of being involved in media management. In addition, we included interviews with ministerial advisers, however, only to enable a 'third party's' account to be contrasted with interviews with the accounts provided by the two types of permanent civil servants included, see Table 4 for an overview of the interviewees. Sampling methods and access varied across the three cases because of difficulties in accessing actual office holders particularly in the UK. In Denmark, all serving permanent secretaries and heads of press and communication as well as SpAds were invited to an interview, resulting in 31 interviews. In the UK, the respondents were recruited based on the snowball method, in which one respondent recommended others who could be contacted, resulting in 13 interviews. To compensate for the lower number of interviews in the UK we refer to the work of Garland, based on 25 semi-structured interviews with serving and former civil servants performed around the same time as the primary data of our research (2017: 174). In Sweden, the recruitment strategy was a combination of both resulting in 17 interviews.

Table 4: Number and type of respondents per country

Type of respondent	Denmark	United Kingdom	Sweden
Part of permanent bureaucracy holding a position where recruitments are based upon merit	12 permanent secretaries (11 serving, 1 former at the time of the interview) 10 heads of press and/or communication units (9 serving, 1 former at the time of the interview)	3 permanent secretaries (all former at the time of the interview) 6 heads of or employees in press and communication units or central policy units in no. 10 (3 serving, 3 former at the time of the interview)	1 top civil servant 5 heads of communication All serving at the time of the interview
Holding a formally politicised position where recruitments are based upon other (that is, political) criteria than merit	9 special advisers (all serving at the time of the interview)	5 special advisers (all former at the time of the interview)	1 State secretary 5 political advisers 5 press secretaries All serving at the time of the interview
Governments in which respondents were or had been serving	With two exceptions, all respondents were serving the minority coalition government led by the Social Democratic Party (2011–15)	Respondents had been and were serving the former single, majority Labour governments (1997–2007) and the first coalition government lead by the Conservative Party (2010–15)	All respondents were serving the minority coalition government led by the Social Democrats (Socialdemokraterna) (2014–18)
Total number of respondents per country	31	14	17

A semi-structured interview guide operationalising bureaucratic competence, rewards, and loyalty from the PSB framework and neutrality organised the one-hour face-to-face interviews done by one or two of the authors between October 2013 and September 2015. All interviews were transcribed and coded according to competence, rewards, loyalty and neutrality when being involved in media management. As the potential sensitive issue of disclosing challenges to anonymity and neutrality may have caused social desirability bias, all interview statements quoted or referred to later in the article have been related to and contrasted against the position of the interviewee vis-à-vis other interviewees of the same position and across positions. Such contrasting strengthens the validity of the analysis as it protects from drawing conclusions based upon mere self-reporting, but also from 'other-reporting'. Hence, although the subsequent analysis primarily includes quotes from interviews with civil servants from press/communication units, their accounts are therefore validated against the statements of respondents holding the other positions. Having that said, including ministers would have added to the validity of the findings.

Empirical findings

The empirical findings are presented country by country.

Denmark

The Danish PSB is explicitly reflected in normative guidelines prescribing that advice to the minister must be truthful, legal, based on professional judgements (*faglighed*), and impartiality is considered crucial for enabling civil servants serving successive governments (Ministry of Finance, 2004: 143; 2015). However, functional politicisation is considered appropriate, and permanent secretaries give high priority to provision of political-tactical advice (Bo-Smith Committee, 2015: 140). Since 1998, three white papers and most recently a code of conduct (Ministry of Finance, 2015) made the hitherto implicit bargain more explicit. Demands by ministers to strengthen the advice on media management drove this explication, which however, has not resulted in such elaborate and specific guidelines for media management, apart from noting that political neutrality is particularly relevant in interaction with the media (Ministry of Finance, 2004: 143).

Rewards

The reward side of the Danish PSB, include permanence, as well as for the SCSs and the heads of press, is access to the minister. In addition, being more involved in the sphere of politics is described as if not a reward, then a natural and vital aspect of being involved in media management (Head of Press/DKHCP14; 15), where you are somehow the minister's 'henchman' (Head of Press/DKHCP22).

Competencies

The media competences of the permanent bureaucracy have been professionalised, for example, by recruiting journalists for press and communication units (Bo-Smith Committee, 2015: 73). The SCSs emphasise the need for providing responsive competence, but based on their professional integrity and objectivity. Heads of press units inform journalists about policies in a fact-based way, while SpAds interact with political commentators on the political parts (Head of Press/DKHCP2). When engaging in framing policies, heads of press stress that they seek to persuade journalists exclusively based on facts and emphasise 'objectivity' (Head of Press/DKHCP2). However, framing also involves a political aspect:

it may be that there is an objective answer, which, however, is the wrong political answer. And in those cases one has to make a small rewriting, not so that it becomes wrong, that is one may not lie that is clearly the case, but ensure that there is a political angle to it. (Head of Press/DKHCP6, similar: Head of Press/DKHCP2)

When it comes to the party politics, there is a thin line or a 'grey zone' (Head of Press/DKHCP1) for civil servants in the press units – and they refer to the SpAds if the information requested is about party-related conflicts and so on (Head of Communications/DKHCP4).

There is widespread agreement among the interviewees that civil servants do not serve as spokespersons and do not advocate in public for the ministers' policies (Permanent Secretary/DKPS7; Permanent Secretary/DKPS4):

In that way you have a function as a mouthpiece, but it is always for background. It is very seldom, that I allow journalists to quote me, and there is also a general sense... at Slotsholmen.¹ It is not something we civil servants are particularly fond of, and I also think it is important... I do not want to appear on television either. (Head of Press/DKHCP1)

Also, permanent secretaries keep a distance with only limited media contacts even though they are usually involved in developing media strategies (for example, Permanent Secretary/DKPS7). Preserving anonymity as a key norm in the Danish civil service is also reflected by the now former Permanent Secretary in the PMO, stressing that, in the 'Danish model', it is the minister who has an external profile (DJØF, 2014).

Loyalty

Danish heads of press units are aware of the line between party-political and policy communication, to preserve the serial loyalty bargain, though the distinction can at times be blurry (Head of Press DK/DKHCP8). The specifics of handling the media sometimes challenge neutrality and the broader understanding of serial loyalty:

I think it is a grey zone when something is political and when it is not, because in my opinion everything is political in the sense that, when it is related to the ministry's portfolio, and the minister's opinion on an issue... that is political, as are the arguments for why the policy she is implementing is the right policy – and that, I consider clearly as a part of my job. (Head of Press/DKHCP2, similar: Head of Press/DKHCP1, Head of Press/HCP9)

Important to note is however, that there is in general a rather elaborate reflection of the line in terms of when the service should refrain from being involved. Media management is described as amplifying but not alter the challenge to neutrality compared to providing political-tactical advice.

United Kingdom

The importance of neutrality in the UK bargain is explicated in the Civil Service Code stressing the principle of merit and highlighting the values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and party-political impartiality (Civil Service Code, 2015). The Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance emphasises that 'Media officers have a duty to abide by the Civil Service Code and to remain objective and impartial when dealing with politically controversial issues' (Cabinet Office, 2014: 5). However, it is also stressed that 'The Government has the right to expect the department to further its policies and objectives, regardless of how politically controversial they might be' (Cabinet Office, 2014: 5).

Other than in Denmark, the UK has explicated norms for the perseverance of neutrality of media officers, stressing that government communication 'should be objective and explanatory, not biased or polemical', and 'Should not be – or liable to be – misrepresented as being party political' (Cabinet Office, 2014: 4). It is important that

media officers must establish their impartiality and neutrality with the news media [while also] be ready to promote the policies of the department and the Government as a whole. Make as positive a case as the facts warrant. Speak on the record as a departmental spokesperson wherever possible and avoid unattributed quotes. Insist that all political aspects are handled by the party-political press office or special adviser. (Cabinet Office, 2014: 5–6)

Civil servants must not ‘Justify or defend policies in party political terms. Expressly advance any policy belonging to a particular political party. Directly attack the policies and opinions of opposition parties and groups (although, on occasion, it may be necessary to respond in specific terms)’ (Cabinet Office, 2014: 6).

The formal rules acknowledge the political nature of government communication: ‘government communications cannot be free of political content. But at all times it is essential to remember that, as civil servants, government communicators cannot join the political battle’ (Cabinet Office, 2014: 7). As noted by Grube, the formal guidelines in

the U.K. case seems to provide a qualitative shift toward exactly the kind of public promiscuous partisanship that Aucoin was warning against. The U.K. *Propriety Guidance* clearly enshrines a level of support for ‘ministerial lines’ of communication by civil service press officers that is difficult to distinguish from open advocacy. (2015: 318, italics in original)

However, and simultaneously, the guidelines emphasise the importance of preserving neutrality.

Rewards

Also, UK press officers enjoy permanence and close access to the ministers. Garland identifies press officers perceiving the close access that comes with their position as rewarding, which they report as ‘fascinating’ and ‘exciting’ (2017: 177). Interviewees for this study confirm this reward (for example, Head of News/UK4).

Competencies

Press officers share the media management with the SpAds, but as in Denmark, the permanent secretaries are less involved in the direct management of the media (Head of News/UK4). However, compared to other civil servants in the permanent bureaucracy, press officers are more responsive in political terms. As a Head of Press reports:

We’ll never exceed what we should do but we are prepared to go closer to that line [between politics and administration] than other civil servants would, and you tend to find that civil servants who work in the media sphere are like that. They’ll tend to go further than civil servants who work in policy or in operation. (Head of News/UK3)

Although Garland observes that ‘the line between objective and party-political information as a routine part of the job [...] rarely presented any difficulties’ (2017:

177), a head of press – interviewed for this study – highlights the challenges of being close to that line:

The news side of things is always the most political because [...] it is where you engage with the public often, through a very politicised media, and it is the thing, at the end of the day ministers [...] care most about. So it is the most intense[ly] scrutinised. [...] and then there is the bit in between where there is a grey area, that is not as easily defined. And that will differ according to circumstances, in terms of what it is and what the right call is, and we will often be making difficult judgements about the right course of action is being seen as being between the walls strictly and being seen as to serve the government effectively. (Head of News/UK4)

However, the division of labour between the SCSs and the SpAds helps maintaining the line. As reported by a Head of News, which also reveals the rewarding side of being involved in media management when succeeding in planting news stories which makes it to the front pages:

We would be there to represent what the government was doing whereas the media special advisors would be there to represent the political aspect of that in terms of what the opposition would do or say about it. [...] In my previous job [...] we had five or six frontpage news stories day after day – all of them which we put there, and it was just fantastic run and that was a combination of me and the media special advisors working together. In no stage of any of this, did I feel that my neutrality as a civil servant was being compromised. I've genuinely never thought that, and I've worked for the labour government, and I am working for the current coalition government. (Head of News/UK3)

Loyalty

Overall, the civil servants perceive the balance between refraining from party politics and delivering to any government as essential for the preservation of their neutrality:

There are people I have worked with who are very strict, they will only do what government defines them to do and there are others who will tell you, you know... the way is to ask yourself the question, would you do the same for any party, if the answers to that is yes, then it is okay. (Head of News/UK4)

However, a former permanent secretary for government communication in the Cabinet Office illustrates a more responsive approach.

You know there is a sort of myth here. An impartial civil service means that you do not champion the government of the day, but you must champion the government of the day, it is your responsibility [...] Ministers expect

support, ministers' job is very hard, they work long hours, they always feel they are under resourced and they are also kicked around in the media, so they don't feel particularly loved or happy most days. So having a staff that doesn't love them either isn't a happy combination. The trick in this life is to make these people feel supported. But support them intelligently. (Permanent Secretary/UK7)

Sweden

The collegial nature of the Swedish government is reflected by the entire government organised in a single, integrated public authority being the government offices, which comprise of the Prime Minister's Office, the government ministries and the Office for Administrative Affairs.

The collegial nature further implies that policy as well as media management is 'tightly' coordinated among others by a central coordination unit under the PMO (*samordningskansliet*), which also has a press unit. This press unit holds weekly meetings with the state secretaries in the PMO and with the central coordination unit (Press Secretary/SWEPRESS5). The unit controls all communications by ministers and the Prime Minister (Press Secretary/SWEPRESS5), including its political aspects (Press Secretary/SWEPRESS5). It serves as a 'strong centre' (Political adviser/SWEPA3, Political Adviser/SWEPA5, Press Secretary/SWEPRESS4), which sometimes uses its power (Political adviser/SWEPA2).

The centralisation of the media management through the politically appointed civil servants and advisers is mirrored in the organisation of the non-formally politicised communication staffs. As part of the Office for Administrative Affairs for the entire government, there is a Government Office Communication Department with the task to provide support to the entire government offices, ensuring coordination of communication with and across ministries as well as with the PMO ([Prime Minister's Office, 2012: 5](#)). As in the UK, some rules apply as laid down in the Communication Policy for the Government Offices. These rules specify the division of labour between the PMO, the Government Office Communication Department and the line ministries, as well as between the formally politicised and permanent civil servants working with communication and media ([Prime Minister's Office, 2012](#)). Contrary to the UK policy, it is about internal and external government communication, and much less about media management, but it is stressed, that it is the press secretary who is responsible for supporting 'the minister in his role as a media spokesperson' ([Prime Minister's Office, 2012: 7](#)), while the responsibility of the permanent civil servants in leading positions is to 'be able to provide facts and background information to the media and other stakeholders on request' ([Prime Minister's Office, 2012: 8](#)).

In contrast to the UK propriety guidelines, there is only one mention of the need to ensure a non-partisan role for civil servants. It is thus stressed that the Communication Policy by the Government Offices is based on its mandate to assist the government and its ministers in their role as government representatives and therefore not as party representatives. ([Prime Minister's Office, 2012: 2](#)). Hence, the loyalty expected is to the government as a whole relative to the minister.

Rewards

In terms of rewards, next to permanence civil servants only have very limited contact with the minister (Head of Communication/SWEHC3). They collaborate with press secretaries which is described as 'dynamic' and 'symbiotic' (Head of Communication/SWEHC1) where press secretaries respect the limit (Nonpolitical press assistant/SWENONPOLPRESS1). The accounts also reflect a general appreciation of the division of labour with respect to media management laid out in the policy. As reported by a Head of Communication, the pressure towards more political media communication is not experienced as a pressure as such, 'as long as they have the policy on the backbone: open, objective, understandable' (Head of Communication/SWEHC2).

Competencies

The permanent civil service is less involved in media management compared to the politically appointed civil servants and advisers. This is reflected in all the accounts. For example, the permanent heads of communication report, with one exception, that there has been no regular contact with the media (Head of Communication/SWEHC1; Head of Communication/SWEHC2; Head of Communication/SWEHC3; Head of Communication/SWEHC4) and they only occasionally provide facts (Head of Communication/SWEHC1; Head of Communication/SWEHC4). As noted by a non-politically appointed press assistant:

We differentiate between political comments and background facts/information and as a non-political civil servant I can give an answer without colour, just pure facts. Explain. (Nonpolitical press assistant/SWENONPOLPRESS1)

Loyalty

Balancing loyalties means a very clear distinction between what is party-political and what is of relevance, not only for the minister, but for the government as a whole (Head of Communication/SWEHC2). While the general impression is that this balance is somehow not challenging to identify, one head of communication with regular media contact reports that this 'is not always easy to strike' (Head of Communication/SWEHC4).

Analysis

Assessing how media pressure on ministers translates into changing normative expectations on the permanent civil service across the cases provides for three observations.

The first observation is that none of the three cases suggests a widespread breach with either anonymity or neutrality, although, as perceived by the civil servants, their neutrality seems under more pressure compared to their anonymity.

The second observation is that the bargain is more explicit in Sweden and more 'by design' than by 'practice and convention' than is the case in the UK and even more in Denmark (Grube, 2015: 5; Elston, 2017: 89). Turning to the PSB dimensions, we

further identify some differences with respect to media management involvement and the consequences hereof, as summarised in [Table 5](#).

The Swedish case reflects institutional *replication* or *confirmation* of the pre-existing serial-loyal bargain. The formal organisation and a communication policy ensure the neutrality of SCSs, explicating the different roles the formally politicised advisers and the civil service are expected to perform, which seems to guide the actual behaviour, almost entirely excluding the media management from the portfolio of permanent civil servants.

In contrast, the Danish and the UK cases reflect formal and normative institutional *expansion* of the serial-loyal bargain. First, the accounts reflect a professionalisation of SCSs' media management. In addition, the accounts reflect an expansion of the 'span of interpretation' from when SCSs perform media management, with respect to the normative quest for neutrality and the degree to which permanent SCSs should promote the policy of the minister/government. For Denmark, this is primarily reflected in the accounts provided, and for the UK not only in the accounts, but also in the propriety guidelines and hence in both the implicit and explicit aspects of the bargain. However, while this expansion indicates a normative institutional *amplification* of pre-existing expectations towards functional politicisation while being involved in media management, and hence entails being 'closer to politics' than most permanent civil servants the accounts suggest a more nuanced conclusion. That is, involvement in media management is accompanied by a raising awareness and elucidating of 'the line' between over-responsive competence (partisan advice) and provision of political-tactical and media advice, which the servants realise is of vital importance for preserving neutrality in a serial-loyal bargain. In other words, involvement in media management also provides for a normative institutional *revitalisation* in the sense of explicating the normative quest for neutrality in the minds of the civil servants involved in media management. As noted by van Dorpe and 't Hart, the account does reflect that the dichotomy between politics and administration serves as a frame of reference both explicitly for example, in the documents on the formal regulation of civil servants' media management and in the interview accounts and implicitly in the way involvement in media management is framed and described in the interview accounts, that is in the minds of the SCSs, and forms 'the DNA' of the civil servants when engaged in media management trying to 'navigate in "the political dimensions" of their work' (2019: 879). As such, the present study confirms Grube and Howard's previous studies of anonymity from a purely Westminster context (2016: 530).

Turning to the third observation, do these differences between Denmark and the UK vis-à-vis Sweden suggest that an entirely new bargain is on the rise for SCSs working with media management in Denmark and the UK? For the civil servants in media and communication units in particular rather than an entirely new bargain, then a more *complex, subtle and sophisticated* bargain is emerging. This bargain as reported by SCSs reflects an acknowledgement of the need for constantly balancing the line between being too partisan in their advisory and managerial behaviour vis-à-vis the media and when advising the minister on media issues the requirement to remain in a serial-loyal bargain. Therefore, we rather found evidence of existing PSBs being to some extent more 'self-healing', in the sense that if 'one party to the bargain strays too far from the explicit and implicit understanding, the other party will respond' (Lodge, 2009: 54). In our cases, it however seems that the self-healing is primarily performed by the SCSs, when responding to (potentially straying) ministers' quest for more media management

Table 5: Media management and public service bargains in Denmark, the UK and Sweden

Theme	Relevance to this study in terms of potential challenges for neutrality or anonymity	Denmark	UK	Sweden
Rewards or loss hereof	<i>Anonymity is considered a central reward in a serial-loyal bargain as it hinders civil servants to be publicly identified with a specific minister's policies which violates neutrality and the ability to serve any government of the day – including when appearing in the media. Anonymity is a precondition for preserving neutrality</i> <i>Provision of media advice to the minister and other tasks involved when assisting in the minister's and the government's media management – with further entails being 'closer to politics'</i> <i>Ability to serve shifting governments, and hence preserve their position when a new government takes office is a crucial element of any serial-loyal bargain and indicates that the functional politicisation has not led to a distrust in the advice that the service is able to give to successive ministers</i>	<i>Preservation of anonymity</i> <i>Access to advisory domain – and also closer to politics – which is seen as a natural element of the role</i> <i>Preservation of permanence</i>	<i>Some preservation of anonymity</i> <i>Access to advisory domain – and also closer to politics – which is seen as a natural and explicitly expressed rewarding element of the role</i> <i>Preservation of permanence</i>	<i>Preservation of anonymity</i> <i>No access to advisory domain</i> <i>Preservation of permanence</i>
Competencies	<i>Public advocacy signals partisanship rather than neutrality</i> <i>Provision of too responsive competences reflects too functionally politicised behaviour which violates neutrality</i>	<i>Contact with media, primarily for 'background', and primarily facts, some framing, but not outright advocacy</i> <i>Involved in advising on media and political tactics</i>	<i>Contact with media, more promotion than persuasion and advocacy</i> <i>Involved in advising on media and political tactics</i>	<i>No contact with the media</i> <i>No involvement in advice</i>
Loyalty	<i>Promiscuous partisanship conflicts with serial loyalty which is considered a precondition for neutrality</i>	<i>Serial loyalty</i>	<i>Serial loyalty</i>	<i>Serial loyalty</i>

while being able and willing to reflect on and constantly balance the line between what is appropriate behaviour and what is not in order to preserve the neutrality.

Turning to the question of how the differences observed between Denmark and the UK vis-à-vis Sweden can be explained, our study points to the effectiveness of formal politicisation and institutional arrangements for curbing pressures on neutrality. This

resonates with previous research on formal and functional politicisation (Hustedt et al, 2017). Hence, an extensive cadre of formally politicised media advisers combined with regulations formally prescribing a division between them and the permanent SCSs, including those working with government communication seems to curb pressures on Swedish permanent SCSs, effectively insulating them from any remarkable involvement in media management. In contrast, the British and the Danish SCSs paint a portrait of challenges, of at least neutrality, which however, is perceived as still manageable. While the differences in the organising principles of the governments included were reflected in the accounts given by the SCSs, these principles were less related to perceptions of (pressures on) neutrality and anonymity, but rather related to whether a serial loyalty was given to an individual minister or to the government as a whole.

Conclusion

Departing from the PSB framework by Hood and Lodge (2006) the article provides three inter-twined conclusions which take the debate and literature on media and SCSs beyond a focus on SCSs as entering a role as pure ‘spin doctors’ (Figenschou et al, 2022), and move beyond the focus on media’s impact upon the organisational aspects of governments:

1. As ministers expect civil servants to play a role in media management, this reflects, in some countries, an *extension* and an *amplification* of the normative expectations towards SCSs’ involvement in more political tasks when serving their ministers.
2. To interpret this as evidence of increased or even promiscuously partisanship, and decreasing neutrality is too simplistic and crude to capture the impact of intensified media pressures on governments as SCSs. So rather than suggesting media management to involve a new type of PSB, we suggest that a more *complex, subtle, and sophisticated* bargain is emerging for SCSs involved in media management, as media management is accompanied by a *revitalisation* of the reflections on the part of the civil servants to balance their responsiveness to the minister with anonymity and neutrality. This bargain as reported by SCSs reflects an acknowledgement of the need for constantly balancing the line between being too partisan in their behaviour vis-à-vis the media and when advising the minister on media issues to remain in a serial-loyal bargain.
3. An extensive formal politicisation, that is an extensive amount of politically appointed advisers in governments, seems to curb pressures on SCSs’ anonymity and neutrality and their involvement in media management.

Although these findings are from contexts within and outside Westminster jurisdictions their generalisability beyond the Western European context to presidential systems or contexts where, for example, populism and democratic back sliding is more prevalent. This holds implications for civil servants’ general functioning in governments (e.g. Lotta et al, 2023) and also therefore, it is to be expected, for civil servants PSBs with respect to media management. This needs to be addressed by future research. Moreover, future research may investigate if media pressure has a differential impact on neutrality and anonymity and may disentangle the implications on both in a more nuanced way.

In addition, the study comes with limitations as we only include civil servants accounts, de facto silencing the other side of the bargain. While research on PSBs including both politicians and civil servants are rare (Grøn et al, 2024) this would indeed be an important next step for future research. In addition, including the impression of political journalists, as has been the case in research on government communication (for example, Johansson and Nygren, 2019), may be a relevant next step addressing another limitation of our research.

By highlighting the relevance of PSBs in the context of the performance, as well as ongoing debates, concerning media management and executive politics, we hope this article will stimulate more scholarly interest in this topic, thereby filling in the details and achieving a more fine-grained understanding of which are the conditions that enable permanent civil servants to preserve their neutrality and potentially also their anonymity in the face of not only traditional news media, but also social media saturated environments.

By investigating whether the relationship between SCSs and ministers are changing in the light of the intensification of media pressures as a question of whether this somehow challenges a serial-loyal PSB and the anonymity and the neutrality of a such PSB, almost implicitly implies a 'negativity bias' in our approach to assessing such changes, if politicisation, neutrality and anonymity of the civil service is our only concern. One may also ask, as Grube, whether it would not serve our modern democracies better, if SCSs were to take a larger step into the media limelight?

In an age of disruption, full of debates about 'fake news', 'echo chambers' and distrust of political processes, the wider distribution of authoritative voice in public debates offers important benefits. (Grube, 2019: 4)

Civil servants may in fact represent such an 'authoritative voice' if expressed with careful consideration towards, for example, the degree of political contention there is around a given issue and the level of 'public value' involved in engaging in the public debate (Grube, 2019: 192). Such a voice may not be against the interests of ministers, as civil servants commenting on issues may in fact provide for a de-politicisation of certain issues (Grube, 2019: 193).

In addition, one may ask whether this in turn also could serve the civil service better, if they allowed themselves to engage in public debates from time to time, not least when facing situations where ministers refrain from taking responsibility as political heads of ministerial decisions, behaviours and so on (van Dorpe and 't Hart, 2019: 889). In case the service experiences either political attacks or political misuse of their advice, would it not serve the service, as well as the public, better if the service used their voice (Grube, 2019: 194), rather than 'await their fates (loyalty)' or 'offer themselves up as a scapegoat and resign (exit)' (van Dorpe and 't Hart, 2019: 889)? Would that not also serve the idea of representative democracy better?

By pointing to those potential benefits, we – strongly inspired by the work of Grube – suggest future scholars not only to focus on the potential risks involved for civil servants' engagement in media management, but also start focusing on the potential advantages – for the minister and the government, for the civil service as well as for democracy and the public at large.

Note

¹ Slotsholmen is an island located at the heart of Copenhagen. Since the Middle Ages, it has hosted the most of the institutions of the Danish civil service. 'Slotsholmen' is often used as shorthand for the civil service.

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Research ethics statement

While formal ethics approval was not required, the researchers obtained participants' informed consent and met the current standards of ethical approval for qualitative interviews at Aarhus University.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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