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## Article

# When Civil Servants Go Frontstage—The Mediatization of the Role of the Civil Servant during the COVID-19 Crisis

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**Abstract:** Mediatization scholars have shown how institutions adapt to the penetrating role of the media. This article investigates the mediatization of the civil servant role when moving from their well-known backstage role to a frontstage role. The COVID-19 pandemic is seen as an extreme case, where some civil servants were entitled key, frontstage roles in the handling of the pandemic, compared to their normal backstage role. Thus, the pandemic has created an opportunity to study the frontstage role of civil servants as a form of mediatization. Theoretically, the study provides a conceptual framework for analyzing the mediatized role of the civil servant by linking theories on mediatization and public administration with Goffman's role theory. Empirically, the article provides an example of a hyper-mediatized civil servant during the extreme case of the COVID-19 pandemic in Denmark. The article explores how media logic entangles with the logic of bureaucracy, creating a new role for part of the civil service, resulting in governance dilemmas. The article thus contributes to the mushrooming literature on the mediatization of central government, showing the implications of a mediatized role of the civil servant, such as competition with the minister, increased vulnerability for the civil service, and blurred boundaries between administration/expertise on the one hand and politics on the other.

**Keywords:** mediatization; civil servants; media logic; bureaucracy; Goffman's role theory



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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed forward several civil servants in various countries who became public figures when communicating about the pandemic and the handling thereof<sup>1</sup>. In New Zealand, Dr. Bloomfield became a household name to New Zealanders, as did epidemiologist Tegnell in Sweden, Dr. Nakstad in Norway, Dr. Brostrøm in Denmark, and Dr. Fauci in the US, to mention a few (Boin et al. 2021a, pp. 27–29). Although the handling of the pandemic varies from country to country, one common characteristic is the new frontstage role played by single civil servants in many different countries, who played a leading role in the COVID-19 crisis to a much larger extent than during a 'normal' crisis situation (Boin et al. 2021a, p. 27).

The link between media and bureaucracy is a rather new research field, especially when it comes to civil servants who become public figures. Grube, one of the prominent researchers within this niche field, argues that civil servants today possess a higher degree of agency through the development in the media compared to their role in the past (Grube 2015, 2019). The 24-hour news cycle and the rise of social media have provided new opportunities for civil servants to operate on the public stage. Civil servants are now increasingly able to share their knowledge and expertise due to increased media platforms, and according to Grube they should embrace this new public role, because civil servants are knowledgeable and trustworthy. Grube coins this new development the "megaphone bureaucracy", where civil servants are capable of delivering public value and contribute to democratic processes when they engage actively in the public sphere (Grube 2019). Beforehand, leading civil servants performed their role behind closed doors, whereas today they are more likely to undertake their role on the public stage. This development has been

accelerated during the pandemic, where leading civil servants have become public figures alongside politicians in the handling of the pandemic (Boin et al. 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case thus enables us to study exactly the mediatization–civil service relationship and its potential consequences, which is the aim of this article.

The mediatization literature in general addresses how institutions adapt to the penetrating role of the media (Peters 2016, p. 9), especially its role in policy and politics. Here, one of the important questions is how governance actors, mostly politicians, adapt their behavior to an environment dominated by a media logic (Hjarvard 1995; Stromback 2008). For example, theories on presidentialization and political leadership link the development of the dominant role of the prime minister (PM) over parliament and cabinet to the media's expanding role (Peters 2016, p. 14; Poguntke and Webb 2007). Similarly, mediatization has been used in studies of political communication in government to explain the use of “spin” by ministers and their employment of so-called spin doctors. The mediatization literature has also recently covered media influence on public sector organizations. Schillemans analyzes the media influence on public (and private) service delivery organizations (Schillemans 2012). Studies of media personalization of politics and ministers have also shown that this personalization of the minister as an individual alters the communications strategies within the administration. Civil servants focus on the minister at the expense of the ministry, since it is seen as a necessity to use individualized proactive media strategies when communicating on substantial policies and initiatives (Figenschou et al. 2017, p. 423). Hence, government communication practices focus on government leaders, while simplifying the complexity of government organizations and processes (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud 2018).

There has been limited studies, though, of the mediatization of central government organizations thus far. Through a recent literature review on mediatization of public administration Tremblay- Antoine concludes that: *“Studies on the mediatization of politics generally focus either on political actors or on political institutions as a whole, leaving public administration out of the fray. While the link between political and administrative spheres is often studied, the link between public service and the media is considerably under-researched.”* (Tremblay-Antoine 2021, p. 106).

The mediatization–civil service relationship in central government is, thus, a rather new and underexplored field, although a few preliminary studies have emerged (Garland et al. 2018, p. 500; Thorbjørnsrud et al. 2014). These studies illustrate how a media logic permeates the public administration influencing work routines *within* the administration. During the recent COVID-19 crisis, however, we have also seen a mediatization of the civil service performing *outside* of the administration, just as the work of Grube illustrates (Grube 2015, 2019).

The article at hand adds to this mushrooming literature on the mediatization of the bureaucracy (Garland et al. 2018; Grube 2019; Thorbjørnsrud et al. 2014) through an analysis of the new frontstage role played by part of the civil service, and the potential consequences of such a frontstage role.

The article addresses the following research questions: How does media logic entangle with bureaucratic logic in the mediatized frontstage role of the civil servant; and what are the consequences of such a mediatization of the bureaucracy?

The research objectives of the article are twofold. The first objective is to create an analytical framework to study the role of civil servants under mediatization. This is done by linking mediatization literature with literature on bureaucracy using Erving Goffman's role theory as a lens that illustrates the fundamentally different role of the civil service in a media logic as opposed to a bureaucratic logic. The second objective is to illustrate the potential consequences of a frontstage civil servant role that Grube has indicated may lead to dilemmas (Grube 2019, pp. 95, 165). To illustrate these potential dilemmas of frontstage mediatization, the article delivers an empirical example of a hyper-mediatized civil servant through an in-depth study of the Director-General of the Danish Health Authority (DHA), who has played a new and crucial role in the handling of, and not

least communications related to, the pandemic. The Director-General has participated in numerous press conferences, alongside many other types of frontstage performances on various media platforms, including television, Twitter, podcasts and lifestyle magazines. This extreme case of the Director-General provides a unique opportunity to study how mediatization affects the civil servant's role when assuming a mediatized frontstage role, where media and bureaucratic logics meet.

The analytical framework together with the empirical extreme case during the pandemic enable us to understand the characteristics of a mediatized role of the civil service and not least the potential consequences of this mediatization, which is the contribution of this article.

*Theoretically*, the article combines a sociological role theory with theories on mediatization and public administration. The overall theoretical framework is institutionalist, with a particular focus on institutional logics (Thornton 2012). *Empirically*, the paper combines media monitoring of different frontstage performances in one year during the pandemic with four in-depth qualitative interviews with civil servants. The analysis shows how the entanglement of bureaucratic and media logics creates a new role for the civil servant, where the distinction between professional role and personal life is blurred. Consequently, the mediatized role of the civil servant represents a more *exposed* role, which may attract criticism in ways resembling the role of the politician. Further, the analysis demonstrates the implications of this new mediatized role, which poses numerous dilemmas, not just for the civil servant himself, but also for the political system. Most apparent is the emergence of *competition* with the minister. Who gets to “break” good news? Who owns the communication? And who is the most popular in the public eye? Hence, the frontstage role of the civil servant does not alone change the civil servant role, but also alters governance in the sense that relation to the minister is challenged. The article thus contributes to the growing literature on the mediatization of the civil service in central government and its implications for governance.

In the following section, the theoretical framework is unfolded before the methods and empirical data are presented. This is followed by the analysis of the mediatized civil servant, including a more general discussion of the dilemmas related to this new frontstage role. Finally, the article sums up the most important conclusions and suggestions for further research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Frontstage Performances in a Mediatized World

The backstage and frontstage concepts derive from the micro-sociological perspective developed by Erving Goffman in which he describes the roles actors play in everyday life (1958). Goffman wrote his theory long before theories on mediatization and social media, but his concepts transfer easily to contemporary government. He distinguishes between two spheres of role enactment: *backstage*, which relates to the traditional bureaucratic logic of the behind-the-scenes civil servant; and *frontstage*, which relates to the media logic and civil servants performing in the public eye. Goffman's conceptual framework thus functions as the glue that enables the systematic study of the distinct differences and intermingling between bureaucratic and media logics in relation to the civil servant role. We will now examine Goffman's conceptualizations more closely.

Goffman argues that the everyday interactions between people are tantamount to *theatrical performances*, where individuals, by turn, are actors and audience to each other's performances (Goffman 1958, p. 183). In the frontstage, an individual performs for an audience and tries to satisfy their expectations (Goffman 1958, p. 93), while in the backstage, they withdraw from the audience, whose potential expectations have no influence on the individual's actions. “*Impression management*” is a crucial concept in his theory. An actor, as a (frontstage) performer, tries to control the impression given to their audience to define the situation. They may wish the audience to think highly of them or wish to “ensure sufficient harmony, so that the interaction can be sustained, or to fraud, get rid of, confuse, mislead, antagonize or insult them [the audience]” (Goffman 1958, p. 3). The intention of

performances is secondary; the important issue is to control the definition of the situation and to convince the audience about who/what the actor is through impression management (Goffman 1958, pp. 24–25). Goffman stresses how the audience may perceive the actor's performances as *authentic* (genuine) or insincere; for a performance to appear authentic, the actor themselves must be fully convinced of their own acting.

Likewise, Goffman stresses that performances are often carried out by a *team*. A team is a group of individuals collaborating on a performance. Like the individual, the team seeks to maintain a certain definition of the situation in relation to the audience (Goffman 1958, p. 69). Each team member thus plays an important role in the overall attempt to define the situation and the impression given to the audience (Goffman 1958, p. 72). The frontstage and backstage concepts are also used in relation to his conceptualization of team performance. Frontstage (or front region) thus refers to where the performance is given (Goffman 1958, p. 93). Backstage (or back region) is the opposite:

*"It is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed. Here costumes and other parts of personal front may be adjusted and scrutinized for flaws. Here the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance."* (Goffman 1958, pp. 97–98)

To understand the characteristics of a frontstage performance and the role of the mediatized civil servant, it is important to consider briefly Goffman's understanding of "*front*." Front involves various aspects, one of which is the "*setting*" (Goffman 1958, p. 19). The setting is an important aspect of a performance, involving furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items (Goffman 1958, p. 19). In this light, the press conferences constitute a setting for staged performances by ministers and civil servants all lined up in a row, with the PM—the team leader—in the middle.

Front also covers the performing actor's "*personal front*" or appearance, including clothing, sex, age, size and looks, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions etc. (Goffman 1958, p. 21). Personal front may also be how the actor performs; for example, in an aggressive or meek and apologetic manner (*ibid.*). Either way, the audience expects some coherence between setting, appearance, and manner (Goffman 1958, p. 22). It is therefore important that ministers and civil servants act in a manner and with a front that is in accordance with the press conference message.

Civil servants traditionally occupy a behind-the-scenes role, in contrast to the politicians, who are public figures taking all the credit or blame. This distinction becomes more blurred when media logics enter the public administration and civil servants are expected to perform frontstage together with politicians. Goffman's theater metaphors and his study of human interaction as performance for an audience may shed light on this new, mediatized role of civil servants, who are expected to perform their roles publicly in front of rolling cameras.

It is important to note the complexity of the civil servant role in modern liberal democracies (Peters and Pierre 2004). Civil servants are caught between conflicting demands: to maintain neutrality while being responsive to the political leadership (Christensen and Opstrup 2018; Cole 2020). The clear-cut politics–administration distinction is thus a theoretical one, often presented as an ideal type (Weber et al. 2013; Wilson 1887), whereas most public administration researchers agree that this distinction is often more blurred in real-life modern, public organizations (Hood and Lodge 2006). Characterizing the role of the civil servant using various criteria for success is by no means a new phenomenon, or that mechanisms of politicization enter central government and the civil service (Hustedt and Salomonsen 2014; Peters and Pierre 2004). What is underexplored, however, is the mediatization of the civil service, the frontstage performances that have become part of the role and how this development affects the already complex civil servant role.



We now briefly turn to the *mediatization* concept to understand the characteristics of media logic versus bureaucratic logic in relation to the role of civil servant as ideal type. Together with Goffman's role theory concepts, this theoretical outline functions as an overall analytical framework.

#### *The Civil Servant Role under Logics of Mediatization and Bureaucracy*

The theoretical approach in this article is “new institutional” (Thornton 2012). From this theoretical perspective, institutions are seen as structures conditioning human actions by providing meaningfulness through culturally embedded rules and resources that are reproduced through the ongoing interpretations and interactions between actors within the institution (Aagaard and Blach-Ørsten 2018, p. 40; Thornton 2012). The “institutional logics” concept directs the attention to the plurality of logics deriving from different institution types; logics that may occur simultaneously within the same organization, creating a multifaceted environment for the individual working to create meaningful actions within the organizational framework (Lerborg 2017; Pedersen and Aagaard 2015, p. 121). The institutional logic approach thus provides a theoretical conceptualization of the emergence, competition, and impact of various logics co-existing in modern public sector organizations (Poulsen 2009; Thornton 2012).

Within this overall theoretical framework, *mediatization* may be considered as an institutionalized logic that enters public sector organizations (Aagaard and Blach-Ørsten 2018; Fredriksson and Pallas 2017; Thorbjørnsrud 2015). Timothy Cook (1998) was the first to draw attention to the media–government relationship as institutions affecting each other. The media logic is associated with traditional news criteria, including the use of drama, personalization, polarization, conflict, and simplification (Aagaard and Blach-Ørsten 2018, p. 43; Stromback 2008, p. 233). Mediatization is therefore related to the need for short texts and clear, unambiguous communication, the need for facts to illustrate the case, strong personalization, and stories with emotional cues, along with the need to act quickly, since the 24/7 news media demands prompt response (Thorbjørnsrud 2015, p. 181). Similarly, Schillemans (2012) shows how public organizations adapt to the news media logic; for example, public organizations find it important to be able to react promptly to stories, to give short and simple answers to complex matters, to provide answers reflecting common everyday experiences, to brand the organization in the media, and that the public should be able to identify with those communicating.

In contrast, the bureaucratic logic associated with the work of Max Weber consists of norms such as impartiality, truthfulness, impersonal and rational decision-making, and the bureaucratic ideal type as neutral expert, where personal life and work identity are completely separated. The bureaucrat is often described as a machine that does not consider emotions in his enactment of the bureaucratic logic (Aberbach et al. 1981, p. 84; Weber et al. 2013).

It is therefore useful to keep both logics in mind when aiming to understand the role of the civil servant under mediatization. The civil servant is part of the state administration and, hence, an overall bureaucratic logic, combined with a new media logic that enters the state administration. Bearing both logics in mind, we can then study the characteristics of the role of the civil servant under mediatization and the potential dilemmas deriving from these different logics.

In Table 1 below, the role of civil servant under bureaucratic and media logics is characterized using Goffman's role theory concepts. The table is a theoretical construction created by the author. The table is constructed using Goffman's theoretical concepts to structure the theories on bureaucratic logic on the one hand, and media logic on the other. The aim of this table is twofold. First, it is an attempt to link the different theories used in this article in a clear-cut way. Second, it is created to form a more systematic theoretical framework for the empirical analysis.

**Table 1.** The civil servant ideal type role under “bureaucratic logic” and “media logic”.

Civil Servant Role	Bureaucratic Logic	Media Logic
<b>Setting</b>	Backstage	Frontstage
<b>Personal front</b>	None. Behind the scenes role	Personalization, Frontstage role, “Whole” person sharing personal stories
<b>Authenticity</b>	Impartial expert, Emotion-free, Zero-error performing bureaucrat	Empathic person/ability to show emotions, Understanding of ordinary peoples’ lives
<b>Impression management</b>	Neutral “machine”	Human being, Expertise with a flaw: human errors and insecurities as part of role
<b>Legitimacy</b>	Expertise	Popularity, likability (SoMe likes)
<b>Identity</b>	Clear-cut distinction between work/personal identities	Hybrid identity: work/personal identities inseparable

Through the lens of Goffman’s role theory, it becomes clear that the media logic fundamentally differs from the bureaucratic logic. To engage with the media logic, the civil servant renounces his anonymity when he enters the scene as a frontstage performer, bringing his personality into play. His authenticity is not automatically given through his expert role but must also be reflected in his ability to perform as a whole person.

We now turn to a brief presentation of data and methods before unfolding the empirical analysis of the mediatized role of the civil servant, and the dilemmas that follow.

### 3. Data Material and Methods

To investigate the entanglement of bureaucratic and media logics in relation to the mediatized role of the civil servant and the possible implications, the article uses an extreme case: the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of the Director-General of the Danish Health Authority (Boin et al. 2021b). As an extreme case, it is not representative of the civil service as a whole: instead, the case enables the investigation of the entanglement of media and bureaucratic logics in its purest form. Hence, this extreme case allows us to study a more general phenomenon, the mediatization of the civil service (Grube 2019), knowing well that most civil servants will never experience this kind of mediatization. Instead, the extreme case helps us to see how mediatization transforms the role of the civil servant in central government when they move from their well-known backstage role to a mediatized frontstage role, and the possible implications of that move.

The DHA Director-General is the highest-ranking civil servant on public health issues in Denmark and has played a crucial role in the Danish handling of the pandemic. A physician by education, he has worked in the civil service since 2011 and as DHA Director-General since 2015. He is basically the “Danish Dr. Fauci” and has played a continuous, frontstage role throughout the pandemic on various media platforms. To study this hyper-mediatized role, the article uses various methods and types of data to uncover and study his frontstage performances and their implications.

#### 3.1. Data

The data includes: (1) a registration of all press conferences during one year of the pandemic, (2) a collection of the various media performances by the Director-General in the very same year (2020), and (3) four in-depth qualitative interviews also conducted in 2020.

The data used to map *the press conferences* is drawn from the press conference archive from the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) website. This archive includes all the press conferences in which the PM has participated. The Regeringen.dk and Rigspolitiet.dk websites, and the Danish National Broadcasting (DR) database, is included to obtain additional information on COVID-19-related press conferences without the PM’s participation.

The data used to illustrate the Director-General's *various frontstage performances* consist of media monitoring throughout 2020 of his Twitter profile, his participation in podcasts, interviews with him in magazines and on national television, together with his performances in information campaigns from the Danish Health Authorities.

The *qualitative in-depth interviews* were all carried out in 2020 and, thus, in the same period as the media monitoring. Four interviews were conducted with civil servants who have played crucial roles regarding the communication strategy and handling of the pandemic. (1) The DHA Director-General was interviewed on 26 February 2020, (2) The DHA PR Manager (under the Ministry of Health) was interviewed on 8 September 2020. The latter has played a central role in the communication strategy for the entire organization as well as for the individual executive civil servants in the DHA, including the Director-General, (3) A leading officer in the DHA was interviewed on 24 August 2020. And finally, (4) the Ministry of Health PR Manager was interviewed on 28 October 2020 (after his resignation). He was one of the main architects of the mixed press conferences featuring both ministers and civil servants.

### 3.2. Methods

The number of press conferences is mapped to document the Director-General's predominant role as *the* frontstage civil servant, presenting the total number of Danish press conferences since the first information about the virus in Wuhan in January 2020 until March 2021. This mapping illustrates the total number of press conferences in which the Director-General participates, demonstrating more generally the extent to which politicians and civil servants perform together as a team, which has become the new normal during the pandemic. For each press conference, information on the affiliation of the participants (minister, civil servant, or stakeholder) is collected. The results of this investigation are presented in Table 2 in the analysis.

**Table 2.** Press conferences between January 2020 and March 2021.

Month	Total Number of Press Conferences	Civil Servants	Ministers	Regional Politicians	Stakeholders
20 January	1	1	1	0	0
20 February	1	3	1	0	0
20 March	18	58	23	2	6
20 April	7	16	7	1	6
20 May	3	3	8	0	0
20 June	0	0	0	0	0
20 July	0	0	0	0	0
20 August	2	6	6	0	0
20 September	3	9	5	2	0
20 October	6	18	11	0	1
20 November	6	20	9	2	0
20 December	5	15	11	0	0
21 January	3	9	7	0	0
21 February	5	3	10	1	1
21 March	4	7	6	0	0
Total	64	167	105	9	14

To study the entanglement of media and bureaucratic logics, various media performances by the Director-General were collected during 2020. The mapping of his frontstage performances, which includes his total number of Tweets during the pandemic, is not a quantitative mapping, such as the mapping of the press conferences. The media monitoring was carried out by the end of each month throughout 2020, registering the different types of frontstage performances that the Director-General participated in. Among his many performances, four were selected: (1) A tweet about his new haircut, (2) an interview with him in a podcast called *The Last Supper*, (3) a feature and interview with him in a lifestyle



magazine and, finally, (4) a front-page story in a tabloid newspaper. The latter was an involuntary exposure (a scandal related to his failure to use sanitizer in a gym). The four performances were selected to exemplify his performances on *various* media platforms to illustrate the multifaceted nature of his frontstage performances *and* to qualitatively investigate the entanglement of media and bureaucratic logic in these frontstage performances. Each of the four frontstage performances are thus analyzed using the analytical framework developed in the theoretical section, using Goffman's concepts to analyze how media and bureaucratic logics are entangled in practice.

The interviewees were selected due to their hands-on knowledge and involvement in the communication strategy during the pandemic. Both PR managers and the leading officer in the DHA played crucial, backstage roles regarding the pandemic communication strategy.

The interviewees were asked to describe (1) their roles during the pandemic, (2) the press conferences and decision to let civil servants go frontstage, (3) their considerations regarding the management of pandemic-related communications, and (4) their view on frontstage performances by civil servants. The interviews have been difficult to arrange due to the Danish lockdown and the extreme conditions under which the interviewees have been working throughout the pandemic. It has not been possible to conduct follow-up interviews with the Director-General or other DHA respondents. The interviews are used to supplement and consolidate the analysis of the entanglement of media and bureaucratic logics and the consequences hereof. The interviews are thus used to provide a deeper understanding of intention with the press conferences, the decision to go front stage on various media platforms and the experienced consequences of this new frontstage role.

We now turn to our analysis of the extreme case of a hyper-mediatized civil servant. The first part of the analysis maps out the press conferences, and the second part analyzes the entanglement of bureaucratic and media logics as seen in the Directors-General's Twitter activity, his participation in a podcast, a feature article in a lifestyle magazine, and a tabloid scandal after he was caught breaking the official coronavirus guidelines.

#### 4. Press Conferences as a Setting for Frontstage Performances

Remaining with Goffman's terminology and his dramaturgical approach to social life, the COVID-19 press conferences may be seen as the necessary "setting" for politicians and civil servants to engage in their performance: communicating about the pandemic to the public. The press conferences where multiple ministers and civil servants performed together as a team communicating to the public was a new feature developed primarily by communication managers from three different ministries (the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Health, and the PMO). The policy coordination was already established between several ministries (incl. Justice, Health, and PMO), but the joint press conferences were a new feature. The idea was to coordinate communication to the public about the development and handling of the pandemic in Denmark by both civil servants with expertise and politicians from relevant ministries. The Ministry of Health communications manager explains:

*"When the first Dane was infected with COVID-19, a manager from the Ministry of Health woke me at 3 am, and I immediately called XX [PR Manager for the PMO and PR Manager for the government communication task force]. Together with YY [Ministry of Justice PR Manager], we then started planning the press conference that ended up with the participation of Kåre Mølbak [president of Statens Serum Institut—civil servant], The DHA Director-General and Magnus Heunicke [Minister of Health]. The continuous coordination between ministries: 'What's happening? What are the corona statistics in Denmark?' It all started with that press conference."*

The press conferences became a recurring event, where ministers and civil servants communicated to the public about the developments in and management of the pandemic. Table 2 below presents the total number of COVID-19 related press conferences (64) held by the Danish government from January 2020 until March 2021.

March 2020, when the first national lockdown started, was the month with the most press conferences (18). The table also illustrates the number of press conference participants for each month, detailing their different roles. Of the 295 total participants in the press conferences, there were 167 civil servants, 105 ministers, 9 regional politicians and 14 stakeholders. The table thus reveals how, in total, most of the press conference participants are civil servants. The DHA Director-General has participated in 48 of the 64 official press conferences. No other civil servant has participated in as many COVID-19 press conferences.

Some of the 64 press conferences have been held with civil servants or politicians alone: civil servants have held nine press conferences alone, and ministers have held 11 press conferences alone. Especially in the beginning of the pandemic five press conferences were held with only civil servants, which did not work out, according to the Ministry of Health PR Manager. He explains that they quickly realized that the press conferences are best when both ministers and civil servants participate: “In the beginning, we wanted a format where journalists could ask all their questions regarding the development of the pandemic to civil servants on neutral territory—it shouldn’t be political. But it wasn’t working, because the questions quickly became political.” Most of the press conferences since then thus featured both ministers and civil servants together.

The strategy was to present unified communication to the public about the development and handling of the pandemic. This strategy entailed ministers and civil servants appearing as a team, making a calm, controlled impression from the government as a whole. This strategy has largely been successful, although there has been public debate about the decisions during the pandemic and whether they were purely political or based on expertise from the civil service (Just 2021). This debate led to a commission report ordered by the Folketinget (2021) about the criteria for the lockdown in March 2020. The line between politics and expertise is thus challenged due to the joint communication from ministers and government officials entering the scene as a unified team.

## 5. Personal Front: From Behind the Scenes to Personalization

The joint press conferences provide a new setting bringing civil servants to light compared to their traditional backstage role. However, the new frontstage role was not just linked to the press conferences. Instead, it was part of a larger and more general communication strategy for the civil servants working in the DHA. The DHA PR Manager says: “Our strategy is to have a media presence and to speak in a language that people understand . . . People should be able to feel us . . . We should always be able to answer in plain talk.”. And importantly, it is not just the Director-General that should act frontstage. The Director-General explains: “Our spokespersons have received media performance training, which we buy from specialized private firms, combined with advice from our own PR department. And we’ve just employed two more SoMe employees.”. The Director-General thus views professional media performance as a necessity and as an integral part of the role. In addition to the press conferences, media performances include talk-shows, television interviews, podcasts, an interview in a men’s lifestyle magazine (with the Director-General on the cover), daily Tweets, and participation in DHA television campaigns. We shall now look more closely at some of these performances to illustrate the intermingling of the bureaucratic and media logics.

### 5.1. The “Haircut Tweet”: From Neutral Machine to Human Being

The Director-General uses Twitter very deliberately: “From the beginning of my employment in the DHA, I decided to have a Twitter profile and to use it actively. It was also important that we had various spokesmen and that we knew their faces. And I have undoubtedly been extremely out front when it comes to media communications.” In that sense, his Tweets are hardly a new phenomenon. On 29 March, the Director-General tweets about a DIY-haircut. Danish hairdressers were closed at the time due to the first Danish lockdown, and the Director-General explains how he sent money to his hairdresser.

The Tweet went viral, receiving 12,800 likes, and 756 retweets (Broström 2020). Below, the so-called haircut tweet is inserted as a picture.

The Director-General thus uses himself as an exponent for a general issue: Nobody can get a haircut because of the lockdown. He uses his DHA Twitter account to demonstrate that he is in the same situation as everyone else. This Tweet draws on the media logic virtue, where the civil servant is an empathic person who understands the lives of ordinary people. The Tweet also represents an authenticity associated with the media logic, as we see him “wars and all”—he emphasizes how his DIY-haircut did not go so well. The Tweet also illustrates the hybrid identity, as a haircut would normally be part of a civil servant’s private life, and that he is a nice guy, mentioning the payment he sent to his hairdresser afterwards. Here, the Tweet also illustrates the legitimacy associated with the media logic: that likeability is an issue. The Director-General appears likeable and human. In the in-depth interview with him, he emphasizes the importance of appearing human: “It’s crucial that you can feel the person behind the communication. You should be able to feel that they’re a human being. We [in the DHA] are very aware of that.” We thus see an intermingling of the bureaucratic and media logics. The former is almost absent in relation to the content of the Tweet but present due to it being the official Twitter account associated with his role as Director-General.

### 5.2. From Clear Cut Distinction between Work and Private Identity to Hybrid Identity: The “Last Supper” Podcast

During the pandemic, the DHA Director-General has participated in several different podcasts. His participation in *The Last Supper*, a podcast that presents Danish celebrities and builds on personal conversations, has drawn considerable media attention. Host Lærke Kløvedal invites guests to talk about their life and legacy. The guest chooses the starter, main course, and dessert, and host and guest engage in conversation over a meal (Kløvedal 2020).

This show circles around the medical profession and his civil servant role during the pandemic. He is thus invited due to his formal role as DHA Director-General, and his role as civil servant is explicitly mentioned. During the interview, he and Kløvedahl touch on several other topics, including his values, his private life and homosexuality, family life, and childhood. The Director-General mentions values such as social justice, being a feminist, and being very environmentally conscious. He first and foremost sees himself as a doctor, which permeates the entire interview. Again, we see an intermingling of the bureaucratic and media logics in the creation of the role of the civil servant. His primary identity is as a physician, and he relies on the authority and legitimacy this grants him, which is confirmed in my interview with him. Here, he states: “I’m a civil servant, and I’m a professional civil servant, in a professional government agency.” However, the podcast also touches on his personal life, and he opens up about his values. Here, the impression management is far from the neutral machine, as we learn about his passions and political views, including how much social justice and feminism mean to him. There is also a sense of hybrid identity, where work and personal identity are inseparable. He is the leading expert in the management of the pandemic, and his physician identity is enhanced with his personal values.

### 5.3. DHA Director-General as Euroman Coverboy: Expertise Hand in Hand with Likeability

The Director-General was also featured on the cover of *Euroman*, a men’s lifestyle magazine, in June 2020 (see Figure 1 below) (Elmelund 2020). A lengthy portrait article is accompanied by a “glam” photoshoot. The portrait touches on his personal life and role as Director-General during the pandemic. The journalist introduces him as a “famous figure” and the portrait revolves around subjects such as his childhood, his homosexuality, and some brief details about a former relationship with his “dream man.” The portrait includes details from his childhood and youth in the 1970s and 80s, where he was politically active in the Communist Youth Party. While he emphasizes that it has been 25 years since he was

active in politics, he still sees himself as a political person with a public interest. We also learn about how his father's death had a huge impact on his childhood and their family life more generally. He opens up about being left by the love of his life. The Director-General thus presents himself as a "whole" person, sharing stories from his personal life. In this way, his performance transcends the role of neutral expert associated with the bureaucratic logic, not least when displaying his vulnerability and broken heart. Most people will thus be able to identify with him, which may lead to sympathy and likeability. The interview also touches on his personal interests and values, including his aforementioned feminism, curiosity about politics and international relations, and how important health equity is for him and the DHA.



**Figure 1.** The Director-General at the front cover of Danish magazine Euroman in June 2020.

The interview presents the Director-General's mediatized role in the sense that it revolves around his personal life and beliefs. The presentation of his person and his role has thus shifted far away from the Weberian impartial bureaucrat without personal involvement in their work. On the contrary, the interview stresses the person behind the role and goes far in the descriptions of his political values and sexuality. The Director-General's picture on the cover of the magazine further emphasizes the extent to which he is literally assuming a frontstage role.

The Director-General participates in the media because he is the highest-ranking civil servant in the handling of the pandemic. It is also clear that his professional identity as a doctor is profound. During the qualitative interview he says: *"I'm a doctor. I'm totally a doctor. And I'll be a doctor until the day I die"*. In this sense, he draws on the professional dimension of his role associated with the bureaucratic logic when communicating as a

neutral expert, enlightening the public about recent developments in the pandemic and the government guidelines. At the same time, many of his media performances are marked by a media logic, as seen above.

We have now seen examples of this hyper-mediatized role of the Director-General that encompass both bureaucratic and media logics creating new criteria for success. In Table 3 below we try to sum up the criteria of success for the hyper-mediatized civil servant based on the analysis so far.

**Table 3.** New criteria of success arising with the hyper-mediatized role of the civil servant.

Criteria of Success for the Hyper-Mediatized Civil Servant	
•	Media performances are an integral part of the role
•	Frontstage skills are a precondition for enacting the role
•	Personalization of the role is required
•	The line between professional role and private person is dissolved

We shall now turn to the consequences of the mediatized role of the civil servant and subsequent dilemmas.

## 6. Consequences of a Mediatized Civil Service

Several dilemmas and potential conflicts occur in the slipstream of the civil servant's mediatized role. Before we unfold and discuss the consequences in more detail, we shall briefly look at yet another media exposure, "the gym incident", which was an involuntary media exposure of the Director-General.

### 6.1. The "Gym Incident"—The Loss of Anonymity and Exposed Vulnerability

*BT*, a Danish tabloid newspaper, published an online article on 28 October 2020, featuring video of the Director-General working out in a gym and failing to sanitize the equipment after use. A woman in the clip, Linnea Bloch, reminded him to use the sanitizer to which he responds, "Should I?", but subsequently uses the sanitizer (Pedersen and Qvortrup 2020). The Director-General was unaware of being filmed, and Bloch forwarded the video clip to the tabloid. The article went viral and caused a "shitstorm," resulting in a video post with a public apology from the Director-General. In his apology, he mentions several situations where he forgot to follow DHA guidelines, and he emphasizes how he will do his best from now on to remember to follow them. The video was posted on the DHA Facebook page the same day as the *BT* article (Sundhedsstyrelsen 2020).

The gym incident is an example of one of the potential consequences of the hyper-mediatized role, where the civil servant uses frontstage performances as a fundamental part of his role. Like a celebrity or politician, he can no longer count on being able to work out anonymously in his local gym. Instead, he is filmed "breaking the rules" by not using the sanitizer. Immediately when the story hit the tabloids, he posted a video on Twitter and Facebook, explaining: "I'm a person like everyone else. And I'm deeply sorry for my mistake." The Director-General, hence, acts as an experienced frontstage performer accustomed to media exposure and the media logic.

The gym incident illustrates how the mediatized role of the civil servant is not only frontstage when he chooses it to be. The Ministry of Health PR Manager reflects on how part of the civil service is expected to perform in the media, thereby becoming public figures: "Of course you're in a much more exposed position [when holding a frontstage role]." The media logic and civil servant's subsequent frontstage role would therefore appear to go hand in hand with some new kind of vulnerability that was unknown to the backstage role of the civil servant associated with the bureaucratic logic. Having become a "public face" the civil servant risks being filmed when he breaks the rules. The focus on the relationship (and possible discrepancy) between official and private roles has normally been associated with the role of the politician and seems new to the civil servant role. Moreover, the gym



incident illustrates how you cannot always decide *whether* you want to be front stage and that the media exposure requires new skills; not just associated with self-imposed frontstage performances, but also in relation to handling bad publicity. Hence, the Director-General immediately posts a brief “*mea culpa*” video on Facebook.

## 6.2. Frontstage Agency Leading to Conflicts and Dilemmas

The self-imposed frontpage appearance in the *Euroman* example reveals disagreement. Not all government officials like the *Euroman* feature, and it stirs controversy: “The Euro-man cover was absolutely ridiculous,” according to the Ministry of Health PR Manager, which demonstrates the fine line between acknowledgment and denunciation related to frontstage media performance. Managing the COVID-19 pandemic is acknowledged as requiring a proactive communication strategy, where civil servants appear in the media on a daily basis. However, posing on the front cover of a lifestyle magazine seems improper based on the bureaucratic logic and the traditional civil servant role as an expert on the development and handling of the pandemic.

This dispute also relates to a more general dilemma associated with the frontstage civil servant role: potential *competition with the minister*. The bureaucratic logic embodies a backstage role for the civil servant, serving the minister behind the scenes, with the minister alone acting frontstage and taking all the blame and credit (Grube 2019). The media logic alters the distribution of roles associated with the bureaucratic logic. The frontstage role of the civil servant may lead to competition about popularity and “likes” in the media between ministers and civil servants, and disagreements over who gets to “break” good news. The Ministry of Health PR Manager says:

*“Should the Director-General go out and talk about this? Or should he leave it to the minister? Is it really that important that they [the DHA] break the results of an investigation that they’ve ordered and already given to the minister, when the minister originally ordered the investigation? Still, they chose to go out and break the story. There have been plenty such problems, and they pop up in all ministries. Who owns the communication? Who should be allowed to go out [in the media] and take credit? Obviously, the DHA—besides seeing themselves as the good guys—they also profile themselves. This isn’t meant in negatively. There’s just a conflict around this issue.”*

Importantly, the competition seems to be as much about media exposure as popularity; that is, who should break news and take the stage? In the in-depth interview with the Director-General, he reflects on going frontstage: “It requires bravery. Many civil servants don’t dare to go frontstage, because of the classic role of the bureaucrat. You aren’t allowed to overshadow your minister. And you must be careful to avoid getting in trouble. There’s a risk for me and other executive civil servants—being frontstage. The DHA is the most communicating public agency within the state administration . . . Obviously, this can trigger jealousy and create political opposition, also among politicians who see us as a political agent.” In Grube’s megaphone bureaucracy, the civil service may provide public value and contribute to democratic processes (Grube 2019). However, it seems a consequence may just as well be competition with the minister, since the increased frontstage performances of the civil service profoundly challenge the role of the minister as the primary governing and responsible political actor.

Going frontstage is not without risk, since it can spark competition with the political part of the system. A leading civil servant in the DHA supplements this point: “[The frontstage role] can create envy. The minister has the formal responsibility, and it may create problems in the type of hierarchy that we’re part of. If a Director-General outshines his minister, you have a problem.” Thus, the media logic and the associated frontstage role of the civil servant may disrupt the underlying agreement between minister and civil servant under the bureaucratic logic, where breaking positive news and frontstage performances are the minister’s prerogative (Hood and Lodge 2006). The media logic alters this tacit agreement, leading to potential rivalry. In Table 4, we see the consequences and challenges that might follow a hyper-mediatized role of the civil servant. The table is thus an attempt to sum up of the analysis of a frontstage civil servant role.

**Table 4.** Challenges caused by the hyper-mediatized role of the civil servant.

Consequences and Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A more exposed role for the civil service, which may attract criticism reminiscent of politicians.</li> <li>• An impending conflict with politicians related to popularity competition and who owns the communication.</li> <li>• Potentially undermining the legitimacy related to the expert part of the role if the role is seen as over-politicized.</li> </ul>

## 7. Conclusions

The analysis of the mediatized role of the civil servant illustrates four overall findings requiring further investigation. *First*, the frontstage role of civil servants as performing actors in press conferences alongside politicians further blurs the politics–administration distinction. At the press conferences, the civil servants share their expertise, which is associated with the bureaucratic logic and traditional role norms. At the same time, however, civil servants become part of a performing team enacting impression management, as exemplified by the attempt to encourage the population to endure the lockdown or to avoid panic. The civil servants are in a partly political context, where the aim of the team performance is to present and argue in favor of the political decisions made during the pandemic; for example, closing the Danish borders or opening schools for select groups. The debate in the wake of the press conferences unveils that many of the decisions have been political, despite having been presented as “science-based decisions”. The mediatized role of the civil servant, thus, not only blurs the politics–administration distinction, but also the line between expertise and politics.

Consequently and *second*, the role of the civil servant as expert may be challenged in the public, as when the decisions presented at press conferences are subjected to critical media questions. In some respects, this form of politicization may de-legitimize the role of the civil servant. However, and contrary to this de-legitimizing, the media logic may legitimize popular civil servants, despite the politicization of the role, just because they are popular and perform in a credible manner that falls in popular tastes. *Third*, the popularity of mediatized civil servants, whose performances are perceived as genuine, may create competition for performing ministers, which may create conflicts. During the pandemic, ministers and civil servants are part of the same team. Previously, the ministers primarily performed on various media platforms (e.g., press conferences, Twitter, Facebook). Consequently, they were the only actors drawing attention from the public. The extreme case of the DHA Director-General illustrates how his hyper-mediatized role, with almost daily performances on multiple media platforms for over a year, together with his popularity, has caused tensions in relation to the minister. It therefore seems that Grube’s megaphone bureaucracy may lead to some unresolved dilemmas and conflicts within the political system. *Finally*, the mediatized role of the civil servant potentially exposes him to media criticism, as seen in the example from his local gym, where he forgot to sanitize the equipment after use. The hyper-mediatized role of the civil servant has, thus, moved from an anonymous role to an exposed, public role resembling more that of the minister. The civil servant as public figure may be popular, but he also risks suddenly becoming unpopular.

It is important to note that the analysis in this article is of an extreme case—regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast number of press conferences, *and* the single, hyper-mediatized civil servant. It is also noteworthy how only *some* civil servants are part of the “performing team” whereas most have maintained their anonymous backstage role. Consequently, the analysis in hand is by no means representative, claiming to unveil mediatization in Danish central government in general. However, we know from the quantitative study carried out by the Bo Smith Commission that both ministers and civil servants in general all identified the role of the media as being most crucial in their work. The extreme case has enabled us to study in detail what a mediatized civil service may look like and the possible implications of this mediatization. Accordingly, the extreme case has

provided us with a unique opportunity to study media logic in close relation to the role of the civil servant as a frontstage performer. It is, nevertheless, a limited study due to the Danish case and the performance of a single civil servant. Obviously, further investigation of the mediatization of the civil service is required. First, future research could benefit from an investigation of *the scope of frontstage mediatization* in the civil service. How many civil servants take on this task and to what extent is frontstage mediatization part of their everyday job practices? Second, future research could also *investigate the impact of backstage mediatization*, especially regarding the many civil servants performing a backstage role, who may also be mediatized but in a different way than with the frontstage role.

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- <sup>1</sup> The article is part of the research project “Civil servant norms of Danish state bureaucracy”. The project investigates on the one hand the current state of law and the legal framework of civil servants in Denmark, and on the other the hand new expectations to the civil service in their everyday life in the state administration with a special focus on the role of the media. The article at hand, thus, contributes to the latter part of the of the project by investigating the mediatization of the the civil service and the potential consequences of this mediatization.

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