

Anticipative strategies of blame avoidance in government

The case of communication guidelines

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Public communication practices of executive governments are often criticised by journalists, politicians, scholars, and other commentators. Therefore, government communication professionals routinely adopt various blame avoidance strategies, some of which are meant to ‘stop blame before it starts’ or to reduce their exposure to potential blame attacks. The linguistic aspects of such anticipative strategies are yet to be studied by discourse analysts.

I contribute towards filling this gap by showing how written professional guidelines for government communicators could be interpreted as complex discursive devices of anticipative blame avoidance.

I outline historically and institutionally situated issues of blame that inform the occupational habitus of government communicators in the UK. I bring examples from their propriety guidelines to illustrate how the use of certain discursive strategies limits the possible perceived blameworthiness of individual officeholders. I conclude by explicating the discursive underpinnings of two common operational blame avoidance strategies in government: ‘protocolisation’ and ‘herding’.

Keywords: blame avoidance, government communication, habitus, discursive strategy, framing, UK government, civil service, public relations, critical discourse analysis, professional identity

1. Introduction

Political scientists have long argued that government officeholders’ behaviour is significantly influenced by their need to avoid blame for various mistakes, failures, and transgressions. In the face of blame risk, they may choose to communicate in particular ways, e.g. using discursive strategies like denying, providing

excuses and justifications, or suppressing embarrassing information, hoping that this would limit the perception of blameworthiness in the eyes of the public (Hood 2011; Hansson 2015a).

When officeholders – government ministers, their political advisers, or permanent civil servants – use defensive discursive strategies before actually receiving blame for a transgression, this may be conceived of as ‘anticipative blame avoidance’ (Sulitzeanu-Kenan 2006). One very common anticipative strategy of avoiding blame in public administration is the adoption of written professional codes and operational guidelines. Such documents are used to automate work procedures, thus curbing the personal discretion of each officeholder and diffusing individual responsibility for causing possible mistakes (Hood 2011). In some countries such as the United Kingdom (UK) and Sweden, governments have devised more or less formal guidelines that regulate the day-to-day work of professional government communicators – officeholders who are tasked with communicating with the public on behalf of the government and/or advising political heads of government departments on communication issues (Sanders and Canel 2013). Even though government communication guidelines are likely to have a considerable effect on the overall transparency, accountability and inclusivity of government, to date, there are no detailed analyses of how blame risks are discursively constructed and mitigated in these normative texts.

In this article, I take a step towards filling that gap in knowledge. I focus on textual examples from the communication propriety guidelines published by the UK Cabinet Office in 2014, and discuss how such documents (a) reflect officeholders’ concern about particular historically rooted blame risks, and (b) are constructed in such ways that would supposedly make it easier for government communicators to ward off future blame firestorms. Superficially, communication guidelines may seem like essentially benign instruments that could improve interactions between the government and the public by setting standards for information exchange. However, I wish to provide support to the view that such documents may also be interpreted as complex devices of anticipative blame avoidance and positive self-presentation, employed by government communicators to construct and protect their professional identities.

2. Anticipative blame avoidance as the enactment of occupational habitus

A useful heuristic point of departure for discursive analysis of anticipative blame avoidance in government is the sociological concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1991). This theoretical construct has been effectively used for describing and explaining role-specific (discursive) practices adopted by professionals, including bureaucrats

and politicians (see, e.g., Wodak and Vetter 1999; Wodak 2011, 2015). *Habitus* encapsulates the idea that much of day-to-day professional behaviour is conventionalised, internalised, and often subconscious, comprising learned habits, sets of skills, stylistic choices, preferences, and perceptions into which professionals are socialised in organisations. *Habitus* is characterised by an arbitrary sense of limits to one's behaviour: People tend to enforce self-censorship to meet others' implied expectations in particular social settings or 'force fields'. *Fields*, in Bourdieu's terms, are sets of relations that are characterised by various *capitals*, for instance, power or advantages deriving from acquaintances and networks (social capital), from knowledge and skills, including mastery of language (cultural capital), or from material goods (economic capital). From this perspective, discursive blame avoidance in government may be conceived of as officeholders using their cultural capital to defend their social and economic capital.

Officeholders incorporate defensive strategies habitually into everyday behaviour in certain socio-political, historical, and organisational contexts. While most government communication professionals may not have attended any training courses that include 'blame avoidance' (or anything similar) in their description, all of them get socialised into the unofficial 'rules of the blame game' in government. They become members of a *community of practice* (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002): a group of people who operate in a shared domain of interest, who are committed to joint activities, who learn from each other about the ways of addressing recurring problems in their field, and who continuously construct and experience a shared (professional) identity. They acquire practical expertise in avoiding blame by imitating the successful defensive strategies of the other members of their professional group. They develop 'common sense' understandings of what constitutes a blame risk and how blame should be dealt with: what should or should not be said or done.

To identify the habitual or conventionalised ways of avoiding potential blame in the text of government communication guidelines, I need to study the sets of relations that constitute the field of government communication, and map out the main field-specific blame risks. Why do government communicators in the UK frequently become targets of blame attacks from various critics like journalists, politicians, and scholars?

3. Government communicators as blame takers: Historical and institutional contexts

Blame is often triggered or aggravated by various and, at times, conflicting expectations – held by both government outsiders and insiders – related to the

professional role of a government communicator. The role of government communicators has two sides. On the one hand, they are government employees, and in the case of the UK, members of the Civil Service with a tradition spanning over 150 years. On the other hand, they are public relations practitioners (even though they usually do not use this label) and the roots of their occupation are in the corporate propaganda profession that emerged more than a hundred years ago in the United States. Therefore, the origins of the blame risks that the British government communicators face can be traced by exploring the (controversial) histories of, and the inherent tensions within these two fields of social action – civil service and public relations – that intertwine in their profession and inform their occupational habitus. I will address these in turn.

3.1 Civil service and blame

The modern civil service has its origins in the mid-19th century bureaucratisation of the British government. Due to the growing number and complexity of tasks it had to fulfil, the government was recommended to recruit employees to a unified Civil Service rather than separate departments, to establish a hierarchical division of labour to increase efficiency of its work, and to select and promote its employees based on merit rather than through political or aristocratic patronage (Lowe 2011). Today, these principles are regarded as traditional pillars of British public administration. The vast majority of communicators employed by the UK government inhabit various hierarchical positions within the Civil Service. They are increasingly subjected to professional evaluation and training as preconditions for advancing to higher positions in the hierarchy. And, as is the case with all civil servants in the UK, their work is bound by the imperative of political neutrality: they are expected to “carry out their duties for the assistance of the Administration as is duly constituted for the time being, whatever its political complexion” (Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, 4). This means, among other things, that when governments change, permanent government communicators usually remain in office and have to ‘accommodate’ new ministers, new policy preferences, and the shifting demands of the temporary political leadership.

The complex power dynamics between civil servants, their ‘political masters’, and the public have received a lot of critical academic attention. The German sociologist Max Weber (1905/1958) famously warned that bureaucracy is characterised by the mechanistic and impersonal application of rational rules that would lead to a dehumanised society resembling an ‘iron cage’. According to Weber, one of the main traits of bureaucratic organisations was the normative separation of administration and politics. However, the boundaries between bureaucrats (as expert administrators) and politicians (as strategists and policy makers) have

become increasingly blurred, and bureaucrats have taken on more strategic policy making powers (see, e.g., Wodak 2011). Bureaucrats with technical expertise – technocrats – may use their increased power to exclude the majority of the population from democratic discussion over societal values (Habermas 1968).

The American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1940) observed that bureaucrats focus on rigid ritualistic rule-following (which indicates timidity and conservatism), meanwhile often losing sight of the actual goals of the government. He claimed that bureaucrats develop informal ingroup ties and are likely “to defend their entrenched interests rather than to assist their clientele and elected higher officials” (Merton 1940, 564). A somewhat similar view is reflected in the work of the American Public Choice theorist William Niskanen (1994) who maintained that bureaucrats are selfish and primarily seek to increase the power of their offices. Bureaucrats are, according to Niskanen, unable to define or serve the public interest; they only try to protect their jobs and pay by pleasing those individuals (‘sponsors’) who have a right to promote or fire them.

From the blame avoidance perspective, being part of the Civil Service means that government communicators are vulnerable to such traditional streams of criticism directed at bureaucracy and bureaucrats. Western societies seem to be characterised by a culturally shared negative attitude towards government officeholders who are perceived as concerned primarily with ‘self-preservation’ and ‘image-building’, and much less with having honest conversations with people and solving citizens’ substantial problems. This attitude arises, at least partially, from the increased public awareness about the officeholders’ use of devious public relations management techniques.

3.2 Public relations management and blame

Organisational public relations management as a profession historically emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 20th century (Cutlip 1994). The first public relations professionals facilitated the positive media coverage of big corporations and helped them to increase their sales using various propaganda techniques. The use of these techniques expanded and became a part of central government’s functions during the First World War, when political leaders in several countries, including the UK, established official propaganda agencies to support their war efforts. The British government’s uses of propaganda and the rising importance of government publicity activities during and between the world wars have been thoroughly studied (Balfour 1979; Grant 1994; Messinger 1992; Ogilvy-Webb 1965; Sanders and Taylor 1982; Seymour-Ure 2003).

During the second half of the 20th century, in parallel with the overall rise of ‘promotional culture’ and political marketing, public relations in Britain developed

into a pervasive service industry (L'Etang 2004; Moloney 2000, 2006). The use of image repair techniques to protect the reputation of political leaders and bureaucratic institutions became to be seen as a constitutive element of responding to political scandals and crises (see, e.g., Boin, 't Hart, Stern, and Sundelius 2005; Boin, McConnell, and 't Hart 2008). By the 1980s, the British government was described as being obsessed with 'media management', orchestrating its publicity efforts, and 'selling its policies like corn flakes' (Franklin 1994).

Since the 1990s, British political journalism has been characterised by 'demonology of spin' (McNair 2004). Many commentators have eagerly pointed out specific communicative tactics that officeholders have used to promote themselves and bypass criticism (e.g., Jones 1995; Gaber 2000; Quinn 2012), and 'spin' has often been used as an overarching term referring to any sort of communication activities by a government (Andrews 2006). Critics have also pointed out that the use of promotional language makes dialogue difficult (Fairclough 2000), and the prevailing approaches to political marketing management do not fit with democratic theories (Henneberg, Scammell, and O'Shaughnessy 2009).

3.3 Caught between politicians and the public

Officeholders differ in terms of what kind of resources and options they have for dealing with various streams of blame, depending on what kind of position they occupy in the hierarchical power structure of the Civil Service. Hood (2011, 24–43) suggests that within public administration, three 'worlds' of players in government blame games can be delineated:

1. *'top banana world'*: leadership, people with celebrity status and often under media attention, who possess abundant resources for handling blame;
2. *'front-line world'*: service delivery professionals, street-level bureaucrats, who are usually not in media limelight, but interact directly with people as their customers;
3. *middle managers, regulators, advisers, intermediaries*: a large number of civil servants who are usually less visible to the public.

Communication professionals employed by the British government mostly fall under the latter two categories. A considerable share of them are advisers and intermediaries who usually remain out of the public eye: they write official press releases, post anonymous updates to institutional websites and social networks, and provide communication advice and services (e.g., speech writing) to top officeholders. Each one of these tasks involves different risks of failure and thus of receiving blame. However, because these professionals stay in the backstage of government, they are likely to receive blame from their internal supervisors (e.g.,

ministers, permanent secretaries, directors) or colleagues rather than directly from government outsiders like journalists and opposition politicians. Thus they may have a strong incentive to perform in such ways which reduce their (potential) blameworthiness in the eyes of their bosses and other members of their professional ingroup.

Spokespersons of the central government departments could be seen as belonging to the 'front-line world' since they interact daily with journalists as 'customers' and provide them with content for news stories. Spokespersons may be cross-examined or heckled by reporters at press briefings and some of them may become infamous among journalists for their attempts to hide, obfuscate, or misrepresent possibly embarrassing information about government. To be able to do their job, they have to develop special skills in defusing direct blame attacks targeted at themselves, their ministers and colleagues. A couple of Prime Minister's spokespersons have risen to a celebrity 'top banana' status: Margaret Thatcher's Press Secretary Bernhard Ingham and Tony Blair's Press Secretary Alastair Campbell wielded exceptional power, influenced major policy decisions, and were often seen as speaking on behalf of the whole government (Franklin 1994; Gaber 2004).

Government communicators who occupy Senior Civil Service positions and work with ministers need to negotiate complicated relationships between civil servants and politicians. Ruling politicians expect that government communicators – like all the other civil servants in their departments – do their job in such ways that do not irritate the public: they should not attract blame to government by wasting money (politicians like to show that their departments are efficient) or by failing to achieve certain policy goals (politicians want to be seen as always being in control and successful). At the same time, however, government communicators may be treated by the 'top bananas' essentially as professional providers of 'blame shields', or, in some cases, as useful free 'extensions' of their political party's communication machineries. The attempts by ministers and their political advisers to use public resources – the work of government employees and the money from the state budget – for the purposes of party political propaganda have attracted particularly intense public criticism. Moreover, the conflictual relationships between temporary and permanent officeholders in the backstage of government have been famously caricatured and satirised in popular media, for example, in the BBC television series *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*, that seem to shape and reinforce the popular perception of bureaucrats as self-interested actors who engage in sinister machinations (van Zoonen and Wring 2012).

Within the British political tradition, a peculiar way of responding to larger waves of criticism targeted at government communication has been to launch an official investigation into various problems related to its practices, often carried

out in the aftermath of some political scandal. Between 1997 and 2011, eleven investigations were initiated by Parliament or the government, scrutinising the ways government communication was organised and performed, and the kinds of relations permanent government communicators had with politicians, political advisers, and journalists (Sanders 2013). Blurring of government and party communications was one of the concerns that came up in several of these reports and it is still a source of significant tensions in the field (Gregory 2012).

4. Data and analytical categories

The adoption of written communication guidelines and codes of conduct may be seen as one of the responses to the criticisms and tensions outlined above. The professional guidelines produced by the UK Cabinet Office include, among others, documents that prescribe to all government communicators in Britain specific sets of (1) general standards of propriety, i.e., directions as to how they should conduct themselves in their day-to-day work, (2) professional skills – abilities, competencies, knowledge – that they have to possess when employed in a particular position in a government agency, and (3) ways in which they should evaluate their communication activity. Notably, the authorship of these texts is usually not attributed to particular individuals: each of these has most likely been written and reviewed by several people working within government. Thus the guidelines seemingly embody ‘objective’ (i.e., non-personalised and therefore supposedly unbiased) technical knowledge of what government communicators are expected to do: how they should carry out their work, what kind of knowledge they should seek, and what kind of professional relationships and attitudes they should develop.

A senior UK government communicator, whom I interviewed for this study, explained that the guidelines are used for training newly appointed government communicators: They attend an induction programme where they are introduced to propriety guidance, the Civil Service Code, and the Government Communication Service Handbook. My interviewee also said that while the Government Communication Service team at the Cabinet Office tries to co-ordinate and monitor the implementation of the guidelines by professional communicators across government departments, the duty to ensure compliance with the guidelines lies primarily with the Director of Communications of each department.

While explicitly targeting government employees, the guidelines have been made accessible on the public website of the Government Communication Service, so it may be argued that to some extent the documents serve the purpose of managing the public impression of the communication profession in the British

government. Guidelines may function as (semi-)formal devices of managing both politicians' and citizens' expectations towards the behaviour of government communicators. The guidelines position government communicators in relation to other groups both inside the government (ministers, special advisers, civil servants) and outside the government (legislators, journalists, political opposition) by describing in which ways they are similar or dissimilar.

For this study, I have collected and analysed the following guidance documents: *Evaluating Government Communication Activity: Standards and Guidance* (Cabinet Office 2012), *Government Communication Professional Competency Framework* (Cabinet Office 2013), *Government Communication Service Handbook* (Cabinet Office 2015), and *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* (Cabinet Office 2014). In what follows, I first discuss some discursive characteristics of these documents, and then examine more closely certain potentially defensive strategies within the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* – a document that deals most directly with the professional ethics of government communicators in the UK and hence addresses certain acts that may be considered blameworthy in their field.

An important assumption I make in my analysis is that when government communicators write such guidelines on professional conduct, they necessarily pay attention (more or less consciously) to the previous experiences they and the fellow members of their community of practice have acquired throughout their working lives – including experiences of being blamed for doing or not doing certain things. In other words, the producers of the guidelines enact their occupational habitus and seek to construct a positive professional identity for themselves and their ingroup. In the process, they employ certain discursive strategies that may be interpreted as defensive moves meant to minimise the field-specific blame risks by limiting their perceived causal agency. Hence, I approach these documents as useful empirical data that contain discursive traces of anticipative blame avoidance.

If examined through the lens of blame avoidance, the discursive construction of a positive professional identity basically involves the use of linguistic resources (e.g., lexical choices, discursive strategies) to depict certain social actors as belonging to a unique category of experts who do highly skilled work that serves an important social function – and who therefore deserve public praise rather than blame. As is the case with any kind of group identity building, language is used to demarcate the lines of difference between an ingroup and an outgroup, between 'Us' and 'Them' (De Fina 2011; Wodak 2011). On the one hand, this involves *strategies of assimilating*: for example, calculated ways of naming that are used for membership categorisation, and particular ways of representing social actors that are used for collectivising them. On the other hand, this involves *strategies of*

dissimilating: for example, adversarial framing of a discursively constructed out-group as a Villain and the ingroup as a Hero or a Victim.¹

The perception of agency for potentially negative future deeds or outcomes can be anticipatively manipulated by using a variety of linguistic strategies (Hansson 2015a):

- *argumentation*: using argument schemes to support the standpoint that the negative event or outcome has been brought about either unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily, or by someone else; such defensive argumentation is often characterised by the use of certain topic specific conclusion rules or *topoi* (see Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 74–80; Reisigl 2014);
- *framing*: representing oneself metaphorically/narratively as a Hero, a Helper of a Hero, or a Victim, and/or representing someone else as a Villain, to escape being assigned the role of the Villain by a blame maker;
- *denying*: rejecting agency (via act-denial, control-denial, intention-denial) and loss (via mitigations, downtoning) in response to accusations (see van Dijk 1992);
- *social actor and action representation*: exclusion, suppression, and backgrounding (e.g., by impersonalisation or nominalisation) of harmful actions, victims, and/or those actors who could possibly attract blame (see van Leeuwen 2008); and
- *legitimation*: providing explanations and justifications of possibly blameworthy actions by using references to authority, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis (see van Leeuwen 2007).

In addition, *ambiguity* of the guidelines can serve the purpose of limiting blame, sometimes possibly allowing government communicators to bypass their professional propriety rules without punishment.

1. Strategies of assimilating and dissimilating have been previously described by Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (2009) in relation to the discursive construction of national identities. I use the notions of Villain, Victim, and Hero following Lakoff (2008) to refer to the stereotypical characters of a narrative frame that often underpins people's attributions of blame and praise.

5. Analysis: Anticipative blame avoidance in the UK government communication guidelines

5.1 Constructing a professional identity

Appeals to unique expertise and professionalism may be interpreted as defensive rhetorical moves that people in various occupational domains employ to claim autonomy and avoid blame. Professionalisation of an occupation could be defined as “a process of social crystallisation of expertise allowing the expert to ‘practice in peace’” (Fournier 1999, 302). The production of various complex codes and guidelines for government employees fulfils the function of signalling their professionalism – and thus also their claim for higher prestige in society.

The authors of the guidelines have foregrounded expertise by increasing the complexity of the texts – and thereby possibly excluding potential ‘non-expert’ readers. First, the texts often mention various other codes, guidelines and legal acts that government communicators are expected to familiarise themselves with and adhere to. For example, the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* (Cabinet Office 2014) includes references to more than eighteen other normative documents. Unsurprisingly, the propositions in the guidelines most commonly rely on the *topos of law* – an argumentative shortcut that (implicitly) says that “if a law or otherwise codified norm prescribes or forbids a specific politico-administrative action, the action has to be performed or omitted” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001, 79). This flood of explicit intertextual references may leave a reader with an impression that nearly every aspect of the work of government communication professionals is carefully legally or officially regulated – and therefore perhaps less open to critical reflection.

Second, the guidelines make use of profession-specific acronyms and jargon. Here is an example from the *Propriety Guidance*:

- (1) Now in its fourth edition, the DM Code is the direct marketing industry’s most far-reaching set of best practice guidelines, incorporating the CAP Codes, PhonepayPlus Code of Practice, and FSA Principles for Businesses, as well as relevant legislation.

It is presumed that government communicators as expert readers know what ‘DM’, ‘CAP’, ‘PhonepayPlus’ and ‘FSA’ stand for. The use of unconventional lexis serves to underline the specialised knowledge that the intended readers allegedly possess, and sets them apart from ‘non-expert’ outgroups.

The construction of professional identity in the text of the guidelines also involves the employment of a variety of categorisation and assimilation devices. The idea that individuals who communicate on behalf of the government belong to

a certain category (e.g., 'government communicators', 'civil servants', members of their respective departments, or advisers to their respective ministers) can be either foregrounded or backgrounded, leading to different understandings of their loyalties and obligations.

Throughout the guidance documents produced by the Cabinet Office, government communicators are represented as a unified and unique group of positive actors. First of all, the use of the collective reference 'government communicators' (and in some cases also 'media officers' as their sub-group) is salient in all of the official texts. This seems to carry a less negative connotation compared to other possible ways of referring to government employees charged with public communication tasks, e.g., 'public relations practitioners', 'discourse technologists', or 'spin doctors'. The latter terms are used by various critical commentators often interchangeably as (near) synonyms to refer to such officeholders. The same applies to the singular label 'government communication' that is used to refer to the profession and the plural 'government communications' that signifies the content or the 'output' of their work: these may be regarded as having a more positive ring to them compared to, for instance, 'government public relations', 'political marketing', or 'government propaganda' that are often found in academic literature.

Second, the fact that 'government communicators' belong to Civil Service may be more or less foregrounded in the text. In some of the guidelines, the label 'civil servants' is at times used interchangeably with 'government communicators'. For example, on page 3 of the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* it says:

- (2) This guidance has been developed by the Government Communication Service to inform all government communicators of their responsibilities and provide advice for specific situations they may encounter.

On the next page, however, it says:

Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance defines how civil servants can properly and effectively present the policies and programmes of the government of the day.

On some occasions, 'government communicators' are explicitly framed as a sub-category of 'civil servants'. This seems to be mainly used as a part of emphasising their dissimilarity with politicians. Here is a sentence from the *Propriety Guidance* that illustrates this:

- (3) Like all civil servants, government communicators must maintain a professional distance from ministers and abide by the Civil Service Code at all times.

While this directive sounds unmitigated (“must...at all times”), the meaning of “professional distance” is not explained in the texts, thereby leaving more room for ambiguous interpretations.²

Furthermore, government communicators may be assimilated with the departments where they are employed, that is, the central government organisations led by ministers. The following extract from the *Propriety Guidance* shows how the ‘department’ is at first attached to media officers by the use of possessive pronoun (‘their departments’), and then used so that it effectively stands for ‘media officers’ due to cohesion.

- (4) It is the duty of media officers to present the policies of their department to the public through the media and to try to ensure that they are understood. ... The Government has the right to expect the department to further its policies and objectives, regardless of how politically controversial they might be.

The systematic use of the discursive strategies of assimilation – constructing individual employees as inseparable from collective bodies such as ‘government communicators’, ‘civil servants’, and ‘departments’ – has at least two effects in terms of blame avoidance. First, it results in a perceived sense of belonging and peer support that helps each individual employee in the constructed professional community to better resist external blame attacks. And second, the de-personalised and (variously) collectivised social actor representation means that responsibility for problems that may occur can be more easily diffused and blame attributions are more likely to seem less targeted.

5.2 Distinguishing between government communicators and ‘politicians’

Dissimilating government communicators from politicians – ministers, ministers’ political advisers, and party political spokespeople – is a central theme in the communication guidelines produced by the Cabinet Office. I use the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance*’s section titled ‘Dealing with ministers’ to illustrate some of the ways in which dissimilating is linguistically realised.

- (5) 1 Ministers don’t always acknowledge the distinction between
2 government communicators and their own party political spokespeople.
3 Consequently, ministers may sometimes ask the Press Office to issue

2. Arguably, some vagueness is necessary in such guidelines, as it provides space for officials’ use of discretion in unforeseeable situations. However, the use of vague expressions could also mean that the producers of the text are trying to avoid or background a problematic or controversial topic.

- 4 or further distribute through departmental digital channels
- 5 speeches or statements that cross the border of propriety.
- 6 In such cases, it is right to explore whether a compromise can be reached
- 7 that will not breach propriety.
- 8 If no such compromise can be found, then it will be necessary
- 9 to give a polite refusal which, if necessary, will be
- 10 supported by the department's Permanent Secretary or Chief Executive.

In lines 1–2, ministers are described as liable to conflating the roles of departmental and party spokespeople. Ministers are thus framed as potential Villains, because they “don’t always acknowledge the distinction” that is admittedly central to the positive professional identity of government communicators. In lines 3–5, ministers are described as liable to ask government communicators to behave in inappropriate ways. This further reinforces the negative portrayal of ministers as Villains who are predisposed to “cross the border of propriety”.

Lines 6–7 are notably vague and abstract: all actors have been deleted and the possible course of action is suggested in a non-imperative way. Instead of giving an authoritative instruction (e.g., “do not breach propriety!”) the authors of the guidance have resorted to a notably ambivalent descriptive statement: “it is right to explore whether a compromise can be reached that will not breach propriety.” This formulation could be seen as telling evidence of the problematic power relations between ministers and government communicators: the former may sometimes misbehave but the latter cannot easily oppose or ‘defeat’ them because of the subordinate position of government communicators in the departmental hierarchy. Government communicators may attempt to save their face when dealing with a ‘villainous’ minister by negotiating a “compromise” (line 6) or delivering a “polite refusal” (line 9), and sometimes seeking additional support from the highest non-elected officeholders in the organisation (line 10).

What kinds of speeches or statements by ministers are seen as “crossing the border of propriety”? An example of this is provided in the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance*.

- (6) 1 For example, if a speech by a minister included an attack on their
- 2 political opponents, it would be improper for the department to issue it
- 3 as an official text. The political attack would have to be omitted from the
- 4 official release. If the minister wished the full speech to be issued,
- 5 it would have to come from the press office of the political party.

The use of the noun ‘attack’ as a description of what ministers do (lines 1 and 3) evokes the conceptual domain of war.³ The framing of politics as war is furthered by the use of the phrase ‘political battle’ in the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance*’s section titled ‘Announcing new policies’.

- (7) 1 In the sense that government communicators work
- 2 directly with and for ministers who are politically motivated,
- 3 government communications cannot be free of political content.
- 4 But at all times it is essential to remember that, as civil servants,
- 5 government communicators cannot join the political battle.
- 6 Government communicators regardless of discipline should do nothing that
- 7 leaves ministers and the department open to criticism in this respect.

Even though it is explicitly stated that “government communicators work directly with and for ministers” (lines 1–2), I suggest that the metaphor *POLITICS IS WAR* is used here as a crucial linguistic device for setting politicians further apart from government communicators. Government communicators may have to deal with “political content” (line 3) but need to stay clear of “political attacks” and the “political battle” (line 5) perpetrated by the “politically motivated” (line 2) ministers. The use of the war metaphor frames ministers as aggressive warmongers. Government communicators, on the other hand, may be perceived by implication as ‘non-combatants’ because they are advised to steer away from conflict. Notably, the adjective ‘political’ is ‘not defined anywhere in the guidelines, so its meaning remains ambiguous, but due to its use within a war metaphor and as an essential attribute of politicians as Villains, it acquires a strongly negative connotation. ‘Political’ things seem to generate blame and should be avoided. By indirectly denouncing “politically motivated” behaviour, government communicators distance themselves from politicians and their actions.

In lines 6–7, the guidance given to government communicators is remarkably vague and ambivalent. What might, for example, “leaving ministers open to criticism” exactly involve? According to one possible reading, government communicators are constructed as being fully responsible for defending ministers against public blame by *not* joining their ‘political battle’. The unexpressed premise of this

3. Charteris-Black (2004) concluded in his study that the domain of conflict (indicated by words such as ‘fight’ and ‘battle’) was the most common source domain of metaphors identified in his corpus of British party political manifestos since the end of the Second World War. Given the *POLITICS IS WAR* metaphor, “society can be seen as composed of armies that correspond to political groups; the leaders of the armies correspond to political leaders; the weapons used by the army are the ideas and policies of the political groups; the objective of the war is some political goal, and so on” (Kövecses 2002, 62).

is that in any case it will be the minister who will be criticised whenever a government communicator in her department engages in a 'political battle'. Another interpretation could be that communicators have to *avoid any behaviour* ("should do nothing") that could attract blame to ministers and departments. However, the full extent and nature of the forbidden actions (i.e., blame risks) remain implicit – these are treated as part of the tacit professional knowledge (i.e., *habitus*).

6. Interpreting the discursive underpinnings of 'operational' blame avoidance

Above, I have examined the professional guidelines that deal with certain aspects of government communication that may be called 'operational': The written guidance pertains to the practical decisions as to what government communicators should or should not do within their professional capacity. Political scientist Christopher Hood (2011) claims that some of the most common operational approaches to limiting blame in public administration include what he calls 'protocolisation' and 'herding'. Protocolisation refers to officeholders' anticipative strategy of avoiding blame by rigid rule-following, thereby limiting the perception of individual agency.

Rather than allowing common sense or ad hoc professional judgment to govern what is to be done, appropriate behaviour is stipulated by formulae, algorithms, computer programs, best practice guidelines, or other kinds of rules, turning human functionaries into some approximation of robots. (Hood 2011, 93)

Herding means "always doing things in groups in some way, so that no one individual or organisation can be singled out for blame as deviant, and potential blame takers can find strength in numbers" (Hood 2011, 92). This kind of collective behaviour may not prevent blame but could make it seem less targeted.

Based on my analysis of the government communication guidelines, I suggest that these two operational strategies of anticipative blame avoidance described by Hood involve not only particular working routines and arrangements but also particular patterns of language use. I conceptualise protocolisation and herding as discursive strategies which can be accomplished (at least partially) in text and talk by employing certain linguistic devices that I have identified in my analysis. I present a heuristic model for interpreting these strategies in Table 1.

Table 1. Anticipative discursive strategies of blame avoidance

	Protocolisation	Herding
<i>General description</i>	Rejecting (some of) the causal agency for negative deeds or outcomes by claiming to be strictly following the rules	Making blame seem less targeted by spreading causal agency for negative deeds or outcomes among many actors
<i>Ways of arguing</i>	Topos of law	Topos of expertise/professionalism
<i>Ways of framing</i>	Framing oneself as a rule-follower	Framing oneself as a member of a group of Heroes or Victims (and possibly framing 'others' as Villains)
<i>Ways of denying</i>	Control-denial	Control-denial
<i>Ways of representing social actors and actions</i>	Deagentialising actions Collectivising and functionalising oneself	Collectivising and functionalising oneself
<i>Ways of legitimising</i>	Impersonal authority legitimisation	Conformity legitimisation Moral evaluation legitimisation (negative comparison with 'others')

Protocolisation as a discursive strategy of blame avoidance is realised, in the first place, by producing and referring to written operational guidelines and standards. Within these documents, imperative language is used to direct and constrain certain aspects of the behaviour of government communicators. Propositions in the documents are based on appeals to various official rules and legal acts (topos of law), and particular courses of action are legitimised with references to impersonal authority. Officeholders are framed as devoted rule-followers, and thus their control over possibly blameworthy outcomes can be denied (control-denial) as they are seemingly 'left with no choice' in carrying out their tasks.

Herding is realised discursively by employing strategies of assimilating and dissimilating. Strategies of assimilating are aimed at linguistically establishing similarity, unity, homogeneity among government communicators, and further among departments and all civil servants, thereby making it easier to diffuse blame within the professional community and reduce personal responsibility for possible failures. This includes representing potential blame takers as collectivised and functionalised actors (e.g., 'government communicators'), emphasising their high social status (e.g., by using field-specific acronyms and jargon), basing argumentative propositions on appeals to expertise and professionalism, and legitimising actions based on conformity (e.g., one should behave 'like all civil servants'). Strategies of dissimilating are aimed at linguistically constructing differences

between government communicators and the 'others' (e.g., 'politicians', 'ministers', 'special advisers'), thereby allowing the former to deflect blame for certain problems by directing (at least some of) it to individuals or groups outside their community of practice. Particular practices are discouraged among the members of the 'herd' by using negative comparison with those who are constructed as 'others' (and sometimes framed as Villains), for instance, politicians who engage in 'political battle' (moral evaluation legitimization).

Herding and protocolisation as discursive strategies of anticipative blame avoidance are similar as far as the ways of denying and the ways of representing social actors are concerned. Both strategies entail denying officeholder's individual control/agency (in case of protocolisation, the control supposedly lies elsewhere, e.g., with the legislators; in case of herding, the agency is spread among many actors) and both entail collectivising and functionalising officeholders (in case of protocolisation, as 'rule-followers'; in case of herding, as 'government communicators', 'departments', or 'civil servants'), thereby making it easier to reduce personal liability for possible failures.

Admittedly, protocolisation and herding should not be regarded as fundamentally 'evil' practices. Officeholders generally act with good intentions when they refer to rules or try to foster a sense of professional collegiality. However, strategic blame avoidance may sometimes amount to discursive power abuse: communicative manipulation.⁴ For example, protocolisation could be seen as manipulative if officeholders calculatedly overemphasise the extent to which the work of government communication professionals is rigidly regulated. The commands in the documents may be deliberately constructed in ambiguous, mitigated, and suggestive ways, hence actually allowing officeholders much more discretion over what course of action to pursue in concrete situations. Discursive herding strategy could be manipulative if officeholders systematically omit or blur information about salient differences among the members of a professional ingroup and their actions. Within the government communication profession – and within the civil service for that matter – individual officeholders may belong to separate 'blame worlds' and have different reasons and resources for engaging in discursive self-defence or image-making. In the same vein, overemphasising the 'professional distance' between executive politicians and government communicators could be misleading, because they may at times be driven by rather similar incentives and interests.

4. For a discussion of what may constitute 'manipulation' in discourse, see van Dijk (2006) and Hansson (2015b).

7. Concluding remarks

Officeholders do not use discursive strategies of blame avoidance only reactively, that is, in immediate response to an individual, clearly targeted accusation of causing something negative. Defensive language use is often anticipative, part of the everyday operating routines, calculated to preemptively manipulate the perception of officeholders' individual control over possibly negative actions or outcomes.

In this article, I explored how normative institutional texts, such as professional guidelines for government communicators, could be interpreted as discursive devices of anticipative blame avoidance. To analyse the text of the guidelines in terms of defensive strategies used by their producers, one has to begin by exploring the blame risks that government communicators might face in particular situations.

Government communicators in the UK are caught in a blame 'crossfire' that has multiple historical and institutional sources. They are likely to be criticised over various shortcomings traditionally associated with bureaucracy and public relations. Moreover, they have to survive in the midst of the often conflicting demands of the constantly competing politicians and the public expectation of a politically neutral civil service. Hence, blame avoidance is a core ingredient of their occupational habitus.

Professional guidelines produced by and for government communicators as a community of practice should be seen as enactments of their habitus, means of constructing their professional identities, and devices of limiting potential blame risks. The authors of the guidelines anticipate blame in two interwoven ways. First, they use language to construct a positive (i.e., blameless, virtuous) professional identity for their ingroup by emphasising their expertise (hoping to discourage potential blame makers from expressing their criticism) and distancing themselves from (presumably bad) 'political battles'. Second, they use protocolisation and herding as discursive strategies of collectivising and functionalising officeholders, thereby minimising the perception of their personal causal agency – and hence also their blameworthiness whenever something goes wrong.

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