

Communicating borders— Governments deterring asylum seekers through social media campaigns

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Abstract

This article analyses a novel attempt by the Norwegian Government to use Facebook to influence migrants' destination choices. With the refugee crisis in the fall of 2015 as a backdrop, the Norwegian case reveals the dilemmas that occur when governments use social media as instruments to control immigration. While social media provide governments with new tools, such as paid targeting and access to new groups of migrants, their use also raises ethical concerns. The distinct qualities of today's social media, their affordances, do not fully square with established norms for government communication. Based on interviews, this article follows the development of the Norwegian Facebook campaign, labelled 'Stricter Asylum Regulations in Norway'. Using a case-study methodology, the exploration of the campaign provides a behind-the-scenes analysis of an ongoing attempt at managing migration via social media. Among the dilemmas that are identified, we find the need to communicate effectively on social media platforms—that is, to change the behaviour of target groups—may collide with the ground rules of civil service information to the public. The Norwegian campaign, sharing key features with similar campaigns across Europe, shows both the potential and the challenges involved in communicating with migrants in a potentially vulnerable situation, on social media platforms. While social media have been described as a 'backstage' for migrants, this article reveals how governments enter this communicative space, thereby changing its semi-private nature.

Keywords: migration, social media, campaigns, policies, Europe, crisis, asylum

1. Introduction

During the autumn of 2015, Norway, like much of Europe, experienced record numbers of asylum arrivals. Governments saw it as urgent to regain control over their borders and were

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looking for new strategies. At the height of the refugee crisis, Norway launched a Facebook campaign in an effort to influence migrants' destination preferences, labelled 'Stricter asylum regulations in Norway'.

This article studies the internal processes and negotiations behind the Norwegian campaign, analysing the dilemmas and conflicting interests involved when governments aim to manage migration through social media. Similar initiatives were run by governments and NGOs in other European countries in the same period, reflecting the new pivotal role of smart phones and social media for people on the move (Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017). Common to all these campaigns was the novel use of media platforms based on messages combining visuals, videos and even music, aimed at deterring migrants from coming.

Social media provide ground-breaking new possibilities for governments aiming to reach out to people. Yet, communication strategies adapted to the affordances (such as paid targeting and detailed user information) of social media raise vital concerns related to basic principles of government communication, such as transparency, correctness and dialogue (Kettle 2008; Bucher and Helmond 2016). The adoption of social media in government communication has in general been characterized by experimentation and ad hoc projects. There is a lack of clear guidelines, leaving individual governments' officers in a terrain of challenging ethical dilemmas and improvisation (Mergel 2013).

We argue that it is vital to explore how communication principles are upheld or modified when governments communicate on social media, and the addressees are potentially vulnerable individuals, such as migrants and refugees fleeing persecution and war. The key role of information for understanding asylum seekers' destination choices, and thereby for governments wanting to influence them, is well established in the literature (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). Studies document that information campaigns have become an important part of governments' immigration management aimed at obstructing migrants *before* they reach European borders (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007; Pécoud 2010; Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011; Oeppen 2016). Yet, while migrants' extant use of social media technology to facilitate migration recently has been taken into account (Dekker and Engbersen 2014; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017), the counter move by governments—reaching out to migrants using the same communication platforms—has not been studied in depth. Moreover, while some studies research the output of information campaigns directed at migrants (Schans and Optekamp 2016), on-the-ground studies that follow the internal government processes behind information campaigns is lacking. Addressing this gap, this article asks the following:

How do governments balance social media strategies with norms of government communication in their targeting of potential migrants through social media campaigns?

Data comprising interviews with expert civil servants and communication officers, internal documents and analyses of social media content enable a unique behind-the-scenes study of internal processes and negotiations within and between central government agencies.

This article's unique contribution is the combination of knowledge from the fields of migration management, government communication and social media. All three fields of knowledge are relevant in the analysis of social media government campaigns directed at potential migrants.

The next section provides a review of the literature on the role of information in European migration management followed by two sections on the affordances of social media and government communication and then a presentation of method and data. In the subsequent analysis we return to the story of the Norwegian Facebook campaign ‘Stricter asylum regulations in Norway’ before we discuss ethical dilemmas with such campaigns.

1.1 The role of information in migration management

Over the past two decades, the concept of ‘migration management’ has entered into the mainstream of the global migration discourse.¹ In Europe, the concept has been embraced by both national governments and the EU Commission.² The concept is found to cover a range of phenomena, including the increased intervention of government bodies in the field of migration and their direct involvement in diverting migrants’ movements (Geiger and Pécoud 2010).

In the academic realm, the concept has accompanied studies on the development and harmonization of control regimes (Boswell and Geddes 2010). Research has found migration management regimes, particularly in Europe, to be converging (Eule 2014; Chetail, de Bruycker, and Maiani 2016).

A key component in both political and academic discussions on migration management is the role information plays in migrants’ decisions to migrate and, if so, where to go (Koser and Pinkerton 2002). In the academic field, the role of information has been studied primarily from the migrants’ perspective (Havinga and Böcker 1999). Attention has been paid to questions such as the relative importance of different sources of information (e.g. public bodies, family, friends, smugglers and other migrants), their perceived legitimacy (Haug 2008) and the level of detail in the information that migrants actually act upon. It has been noted that various types of information play different roles for different groups of migrants, such as forced versus voluntary migration and for different nationalities (Brekke and Five Aarset 2009; Crawley 2010). Government information has, for example, been found to travel fast among Somali asylum seekers on their way to Europe due to their clan-based social structure, while applicants from Chechnya arrived as families with little access to information through migrant-networks (Brekke 2004).

Less attention has been paid to the active communication efforts made by governments directed at migrants. In the political realm, discussions have centred on how government communication towards potential asylum seekers can influence arrival patterns (Brekke 2004). In European receiving states, these efforts have been directed at ‘reputation management’—that is, not appearing more attractive to asylum seekers than neighbouring countries (Thielemann 2003).

Information campaigns have become a central part of European immigration management aimed at deterring migrants *before* they reach European borders (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011). A range of information initiatives has been undertaken by individual European countries, the International Organization for Immigration (IOM) and within the frameworks of the European Union (EU) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) since the 1990s (Nieuwenhuys and Pécoud 2007; Pécoud 2010; Oeppen 2016; Schans and Optekamp 2016). The main focuses are the risks involved in unauthorized journeys, the low chances of gaining a residence permit and the

hardship of undocumented life in Europe. Governments argue that the aim is to help through providing correct information to potential migrants that are surrounded by rumours and false information from smugglers (Pécoud 2010). This humanitarian argument is criticized by scholars pointing to the deterrence function of these campaigns, with a primary aim to stop migrants rather than to help them (Oeppen 2016). Guidelines for best practices on how to design and operate information campaigns include the use of multiple types of media, clear and engaging messages and the targeting of whole communities (Browne 2015). According to UNHCR guidelines (UNHCR 2011), campaigns should not target people who have a legal claim for asylum and should include information about routes to regularized migration. This quest for balanced information is found to be lacking in several of the information campaigns by European governments (Pécoud 2010).

Even though information campaigns directed at potential migrants have become a widely used tool in immigration management, their impact is highly disputed. Studies point to the lack of effective evaluation tools and the many information barriers in targeted countries: People are often resistant to information they believe comes from a vested interest; they might think that their situation makes the journey worthwhile in spite of dangers, and they might trust their own knowledge and familiar sources of information more than messages from foreign governments. Moreover, the right persons might actually be difficult to reach through information campaigns that have been launched on traditional media platforms with a restricted audience (Carling and Hernández-Carretero 2011; Browne 2015).

1.2 The affordances of social media

Social media platforms, also known as social network sites or network communities, change continuously, but a key characteristic is that they allow users to create and share content and connect with each other (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe 2007). The *interactive* qualities of social media make them qualitatively different from traditional mass communication, where messages are produced and broadcast from one to many. Digital and social media allow both open and closed mass communication (i.e. broadcasting to a huge, global audience), group communication (i.e. members of a Facebook group) and interpersonal communication (i.e. chatting person to person) as well as non-verbal and image-based communication (i.e. through devices such as emoticons, likes, shares, retweets and video uploads). The user-generated nature and sharing of content on social media blur the line between producer and consumer. Social networking sites hence function both as media for publishing and as networks for social relations (Enjolras et al. 2013).

Recent research on social media focuses on how different platforms by design allow for, restrict or encourage *certain* types of interactions and responses, such as commenting, sharing or 'liking' a post. This meeting point between technological design and use is called the *affordances* of social media (Bucher and Helmond 2016). One example of how such affordances restrict and encourage responses is the 'like' buttons in the Facebook interface. A 'dislike' button has never existed, while in 2016 the functionality was expanded with five additional reaction emojis: 'love', 'haha', 'wow', 'sad' and 'angry'. To evaluate a post negatively is hence restricted, while certain emotional responses are encouraged. For

stakeholders using social media platforms, the ultimate goal is to reach and engage people, and formats that trigger emotions, such as hope, surprise or anger, tend to rise in popularity and reach (Hermida 2014).

While the functionality of sharing and liking are visible to any user of social media, other aspects are buried in the technological design of these services. Algorithms and measurement functionalities track and analyse enormous amounts of data and decide how flows of information are spread and targeted to individual users (van Dijck 2013; Bucher and Helmond 2016). The central social media platforms, like Facebook and Twitter, are commercial enterprises. They change their algorithms frequently and keep them secret to protect their business model (Langlois and Elmer 2013). These expanding platforms started up as seemingly idealistic projects to connect people but have gradually introduced sponsored content and commercials. Today they offer customers finely targeted advertising and information about targets groups. Social media have become big business.

1.3 Social media and government communication

A central insight from government communication studies is that information strategies are formed by partly conflicting aims. On one hand, communication has become a key concern of government agencies in most developed democracies; communication departments expand and practices are professionalized and to an increasing degree influenced by public relation principles of branding and proactive media policies (Sanders and Canel 2013). On the other hand, democratic governments operate within a legal framework based on citizens' rights and limitation of power (Kettle 2008). Government agencies are, as opposed to private corporations or political parties, restricted by freedom of information laws and public service norms (Pallas, Fredriksson and Wedin 2016; Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou and Ihlen 2014). Even if the legal framework might differ, liberal democracies share the basic premise that central government is held accountable to the public through transparent practices that keep citizens informed about their mandates, functioning and policy processes (Mulgan 2007; Sanders and Canel 2013).

Yet, even if formal regulations limit how governments should communicate with the public, how communication work should be developed, organized and/or directed in day-to-day practices, is generally not explicitly discussed in public service laws and freedom of information acts. The communication policies adopted by various governments vary considerably, but they tend to have the form of more loosely defined guidelines rather than concrete instructions (Ward 2007). This indicates that communication work in central governments has room for discretion, allowing for negotiations and competing interests (Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, and Ihlen 2014).

This is in particular evident in the adoption of new media technology. The limited number of studies on social media use in government find that social media has been adopted in the wake of visionary political initiatives, often in a decentralized and experimental manner (Mergel 2013). The assumption has been that these platforms will enhance government transparency and citizen participation, yet studies find that government agencies in practice have difficulties with the interactive component in regard to continuous feedback between citizens and agencies. Rather than entering processes of dialogue, government communication on social media tends to be dominated by one-way information

(Bertot, Jaeger and Hansen 2012; Linders 2012). Whereas most studies are critical of this reluctance to fully adapt to the affordances of social media, others point to real challenges and limitations related to privacy concerns and record management (Bertot et al. 2012; Mergel 2012).

In Norway, the guidelines for communication practices and strategies are outlined in the so-called 'Central Government Communication Policy' document (AAD 2009). They hold up transparency, correctness, comprehensiveness and dialogue as key values. These are key norms related to the main principle of democratic accountability. Like communication guidelines in other countries, they do, however, not discuss how these norms should be interpreted in practice or related to new types of media strategies (Sanders and Canel 2013). Information campaigns in particular are mentioned only in brief in the guidelines. They should follow the main principles of government communication, but should be based on careful research and evaluation and preferably contact with target groups in the design phase (AAD 2009: 18).

Social media are not mentioned in the guidelines, but agencies are encouraged to find new and effective ways to reach the audience. The question here is how the principles of transparency, neutrality, comprehensiveness and correctness are secured or modified when governments communicate on commercial social media platforms. This question is pertinent as these platforms are controlled by a third party, with affordances such as like-, share- and comment functions based on messages that speak to emotions as much as reason and where visuals, videos and even sounds are as important as written texts.

Thus far, the existence and scope of governments' use of paid content and targeted advertising on social media has not been studied. Furthermore, while many studies measure the degree of interactivity or lack thereof, studies of how, or to what degree, government communication is adapted to the jargon of social media in the form of personalized or emotional messaging based in combinations of pictures, videos and written texts are lacking. A more critical approach is needed that acknowledges that social media in themselves are powerful communication tools and that they are designed not only to enhance communication but to sustain commercial enterprises that design how people are informed and how they communicate. In essence, this article explores the relations between communication principles and strategic practices in social media campaigns. The focus is in essence on what happens when platforms previously used by migrants to make migration easier are used by governments with the opposite scope: to make migration seem less worthwhile.

2. Method and design

The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Security, which initiated the Facebook campaign studied here, is responsible for formulating and coordinating legislation and policies on immigration in Norway. The communication department of the ministry is placed directly beneath the top level of the political and administrative direction of the ministry. In the Norwegian central administration, civil servants, including communication officials, are characterized as being politically loyal but also professionally autonomous, paying close attention to universal procedural rules (Christensen 2011).

The research presented in this article was commissioned by the same ministry. While this secured access to informants, internal processes and documents, the research team was left to independently formulate the research questions, design the study, interpret the results and finalize the analysis.

Three main sources of data form the basis of this study: interviews with civil servants, a review of the Norwegian web-based campaign and internal documents (for details see [Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017](#)). The interviews were conducted January–March 2017.

Interviews were conducted with civil servants in the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, in the Directorate of Immigration, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and with other civil servants involved in the Facebook campaign. Altogether, eight interviews were conducted. Informants were selected based on their engagement with the campaign. Both communication officers and professional civil servants were interviewed to explore the relations and possible conflicts between a communication profession and the migration policy field. Main topics in the guide were how the campaign was initiated and launched, by what objectives and aims, and on the basis of what principles, constraints and resources. The interviews focused in particular on how civil servants in this case had to improvise and follow their intuition and gut feeling of right and wrong rather than standard procedures and rules. A standard open approach was used. Combined with a flexible interview guide, this approach allowed us to add new topics of interest to our list of questions as they appeared during the interviews.

All interviews were conducted face-to-face by two researchers, relying on written notes. This dual presence had several advantages, including that it secured full attention to the informant during the interview, proved useful during debriefs and also allowed for later joint analysis of the material.

The informants were motivated to participate in the study. The initiative for the study had been taken by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, so they were to some extent obliged to take part. In addition, however, the informants saw the campaign as an interesting, mostly successful and innovative endeavour, in which they had been personally involved. Their enthusiasm persisted even as the researchers probed the more challenging aspects of the campaign, such as the ethical issue of potentially vulnerable target groups, the relationship with the political leadership and the use of controversial strong communicative formats (sounds, emotional messaging).

As civil servants working in the field of migration, the informants were conscious of the potential dangers of speaking against the current political line within their institutions. To counter this, the informants were assured at the start of the interview of the value of them providing their personal experience. Combined with their strong motivation to ‘tell their story’ and a clear choice of not being cited, the interviews provided a context where the informants could speak candidly. In the initial reporting from the study, the informants were allowed to review and accept their statements and our interpretations thereof. In cases where misunderstandings were detected, the final version was corrected.

The second data source consists of a content analysis based on a close reading of the Norwegian Facebook campaign ‘Stricter asylum regulations in Norway’. This included a review of the historical development of postings, their wordings, links to other sources and news sites, and user activity including likes, shares and comments. In addition a selection of

deleted comments provided by the civil servants who had been moderating the comments was analysed. These comments contained hate speech or threats. The videos posted in the second stage of the campaign, were analysed with a particular view for the use of live images, music and voice over. Both written texts and videos posted by the government were analysed with regard to the central communication norms of comprehensiveness, correctness and transparency and their use of a perceived effective language like directness and appeal to emotions (general public v. 'you').

The third data source consisted of internal documents related to the campaign, including internal talking points, presentations, memos, evaluations and central policy documents outlining principles for the communication of central public administration. The internal memos and evaluations provided data on outreach and strategies behind the campaign as well as measures of success criteria. These data hence strengthened and nuanced the more personal stories from the interviews.

The analysis is based on the systematic triangulation of the different data sources (interviews, content analysis, internal documents). Comparing how informants present their experiences and practices with actual campaign output and internal evaluations, enables an examination of relations between formal principles and practical communication skills within the context of a perceived crisis and feeling of political urgency as well as the development of new forms of cooperation crossing traditional agency borders.

3. Analysis

'Norway Launches Social Media Campaign to Discourage Refugees from Entering.' This headline appeared in *Newsweek* in November 2015, referring to a statement from the Norwegian State Secretary.³ This unusual attention from international media caused a stir in the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the agency in charge of regulating immigration to Norway. In reality, the Facebook campaign referred to had not yet been launched. In the weeks leading up to the statement, civil servants in the ministry had in fact been reluctant about implementing the idea, pointing to the many challenges and potential pitfalls of using Facebook and social media to inform migrants about changes in immigration policies.

3.1 The launch of the Stricter campaign

The Norwegian campaign came at the peak of unprecedented asylum arrivals to Europe and Norway during the autumn of 2015. At the year's end, more than 31,000 asylum seekers were registered in Norway, placing Norway among the top five receiving countries in Europe, relative to population size.⁴ The number thereby superseded by far the 11,000 yearly averages of previous years. Meanwhile a total of 1.3 million asylum seekers arrived in Europe. A list of restrictive measures was drafted by Norwegian politicians. Party lines were crossed, and all but two political parties signed a common policy document outlining a set of restrictions (Ministry of Justice and Public Security 2015).

This was the first Norwegian information campaign built on a social media platform. Campaigns had previously used traditional media channels targeting single nationalities.⁵

Before 2015, the use of such campaigns had played a modest role in the Norwegian government's overall efforts to manage migration.

The experience of a massive refugee crisis in the autumn of 2015 was felt in all public sectors with the mandate to steer migration and handle migrants' arrivals. Government agencies had to improvise, speed up processes and experiment with new types of shelter and housing facilities, ask for assistance from NGOs and improvise health care and control systems and new forms of communication.

The Norwegian government was looking for new ways to manage and deter new arrivals. They found that communicating with potential migrants through social media represented one such opportunity. In 2015 the attitude among government bodies had been characterized by great enthusiasm for social media for several years. A range of political and administrative initiatives had urged government agencies to engage and communicate on social media (Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou and Ihlen 2014). The Ministry of Justice was one of the very few agencies which had not taken the step. A communication officer explains: 'We were right out scared of using social media. We really wanted to do it but were acutely aware of the risks involved' (Civil servant, interview).

This crisis context provided the final push that a media-conservative ministry needed to begin experimenting. During this period, the sentiment within the responsible Ministry of Justice and Public Security was, as one informant put it, that 'Something had to be done' about the number of arrivals (Civil servant, interview).

The idea for the campaign originally came from the political leadership in the Ministry of Justice. They, with the Secretary of State at the helm, instructed the communication department to get on Facebook 'in order to warn potential asylum seekers without need for protection not to come' (Civil servant, interview). As part of standard procedure, the communication department wrote a memo on possible risks—in other words, a list of 'everything that could go wrong'. The list included how to handle comments, as Facebook pages by default are open for comments from other users. As described in previous research (Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou and Ihlen 2014), two-way communication through social media poses a challenge for public agencies who are expected to use the Facebook format while at the same time ensuring that the content on their pages does not break laws regulating hate speech, defamation and privacy.

The before-the-fact announcement by State Secretary Kallmyr in *Newsweek*⁶ on Monday, 2 November 2015, spurred hectic action in the communication department in the Ministry of Justice. They had four days to get the already-announced Facebook page up and running. As described in many studies of how public agencies adopt social media strategies, the process was based on improvisation rather than long-term planning (e.g. Mergel 2013). As one civil servant and social media expert put it: 'It was a "jump and see where you land" type of process.'

Technically, it is easy to make a Facebook page, but there was a list of decisions to be made, including finding a title for the campaign and deciding on an initial layout. When the page was launched, on Friday, 6th November, the title of the page and the profile picture, the Norwegian Lion, a part of the Norwegian Coat of Arms, was in place. The identity of the page owner was clear (see Figure 1).

Initially, the page was open for comments, sharing and 'liking', all key Facebook affordances. The first posting on the new Facebook page was an announcement of a list of



Figure 1. Layout of campaign page.

restrictive measures meant ‘to stem the flow of asylum seekers to Norway’. Among the suggested changes in policies were a reduction of benefits in reception centres, temporary residency, focus on return and limitations to family reunion. The content was in English.

The day of the launch passed quietly. No comments were posted on the campaign page. Before leaving for the weekend, as a precaution, the communication team in the ministry liaised with the around-the-clock crisis support team for all ministries. They were instructed to oversee the page and to remove inappropriate postings. On Saturday night the State Secretary appeared on the national news, where he referred to the new communication initiative. The day after, the Facebook page was shared, liked and commented on. The initial comments were dominated by people sympathizing with the far-right governing Progress Party. More people joined in, and the comments increased exponentially in number during that Sunday. The wording became increasingly negative to immigration, immigrants and asylum seekers.

Then a storm hit us. What had started quietly on Sunday just increased. Monday was crazy. Some early commentators came with what appeared to be a death threat. (Civil servant, interview)

The number of comments became overwhelming for the staff trying to moderate the incoming profanities. As soon as one comment was deleted, others appeared elsewhere in the threads. Photos depicting children injured in the Syrian war were among the posts. Communication officers spent their full working capacity monitoring the Facebook-page. They aimed at following the Facebook mantra being that if you have a Facebook page, people should be allowed to comment. They posted disclaimers and encouraged

commentators to show decency, to no avail. The comments kept pouring in. ‘Suddenly, hateful comments were posted, saying “fuck Islam” and the like. Others angrily answered back. And this happened on a page under the ministry’s control!’ (Civil servant, interview).

Most reactions were hateful of refugees and highly critical of the refugee regulation regimes of European countries. The activities on the page soon reached Norwegian news media, spurring headlines and critical coverage. The highly stressful situation, clearly out of the control of the ministry, came to an end when the Prime Minister’s Office finally instructed the ministry to remove all incoming posts. A banner was put on top of the page with the message: ‘All comments will be deleted.’

After the first chaotic week, the communication officers in charge of running the campaign found that they had to reconsider how they could best adapt to and profit from the format and design of the Facebook campaign. It was clear that the Stricter campaign necessitated the setup of a communication plan, including a clearly formulated goal, available means and defined target groups. It was evident to the involved actors that this type of communication initiative required a new type of cooperation, crossing traditional ministerial divides. To reach out to potential migrants, the expertise and international network of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was deemed necessary. In the case of the Stricter campaign, communication officers from both ministries came together and formed a close-knit team, with civil servants from both ministries working full time with the campaign for an extended period.

With the MFA on board, Norwegian embassies participated in the Facebook campaign. The ministry’s stations in countries of origin and transit also participated by other means, such as meetings with diaspora in transit countries, NGOs in transit, posters at train stations and points of transit and handing out flyers. However, the Facebook page remained the core of the campaign.

There was an apparent clash between the strict message of the campaign and the information profile of the involved Norwegian embassies. Their Facebook pages are normally used to provide positive information about Norway and Norwegian culture. As explained by a civil servant from the MFA:

We realized that when we presented the message on our webpages, it reached the wrong audience. There was a lot of noise, because those pages are usually used to give information about culture. It was completely wrong that the embassies should have to carry the burden of spreading such a restrictive message. (Civil servant, interview)

A solution was found by having the embassies provide only a link to the designated ‘Stricter’ page on their webpages.

3.2 Format and design

The new communication plan had to address how the strong interactive element of social media could be handled efficiently. The new strategy was to make full use of some of the functions of social media, while circumventing others. Postings and comments were not welcome, while ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ were welcomed. As one informant put it: ‘We wanted to have a fact-based page. We really didn’t expect the comments to play an important role. Good old fashioned one-way-communication. That’s what we expected, except that we wanted the added value of people being able to “like” and “share”’ (Civil servant, interview).

A commercial marketing company provided a solution to the ministry's situation. Fanbooster, a Facebook partner specializing in social media ads, page management and analytics, could secure the wanted functionality (target groups etc.) while filtering out unwanted features, such as the comment function. As a principle, Facebook does not allow pages without the comment function but accepts the use of filters that weed out most words used in comments. In practice, this functions as a wall, blocking all comments. The software was labelled 'troll-control' by the campaign team. It is worth noting that this filter is hidden to users and not openly conveyed on the Facebook pages that use them. As such this type of technique is part of the many embedded affordances of Facebook, not part of the visible surface functions people interact with.

3.3 Target group(s)

The stated goal of the Facebook campaign was to reach 'potential asylum seekers and other migrants'. They were to be presented with factual knowledge about the immigration regulations in Norway and to take this into account when deciding whether to move across borders and, if already on the move, to not choose Norway as their destination. As such the general Norwegian audience was not really targeted—no matter what side they belonged to in the immigration debate.⁷

Since 2012, when Facebook for the first time allowed ads in user feeds (van Dijck 2013), the number of so-called sponsored stories has increased steadily. The same goes for Facebook's ability to sell data about their users' activities and browser data, used to finely target those who are exposed to these sponsored posts. Facebook offer customers the possibility to pay for the placement of posts in the news streams of specified groups of users. Moreover, Facebook provides detailed data of the reach of these posts.

That public agencies make use of these big data to get information about a target audience and reach it is not reported in the literature. For Norwegian public agencies, the use of this type of paid advertising is thus far quite rare. Yet, for the 'Stricter campaign', Facebook's targeting functionality offered a ground-breaking new way to reach individuals normally out of reach. These were exactly the groups of (potential) migrants the ministry wanted to reach. Now they could even target them after they had left their countries of origin and were on the move. Hence, even if unusual and controversial, it was decided to sponsor the posts on social media to reach the target groups of the campaign.

The Stricter team conferred with migration experts within the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and selected two target groups based on their travelling routes and migration patterns: young men from Afghanistan and young men from Ethiopia and Eritrea. In addition, the campaign targeted persons belonging to these groups that were situated outside of their home countries. The target groups' profile also included persons who, in addition to being male and from the target countries, had expressed interest in 'travelling' or 'Europe'. These were seen as potential migrants to Norway. The Stricter team again used the same commercial company, Fanbooster that had provided the filter technology to specify the target groups. The goal was to reach potential migrants while they were on the move.

Arrivals from Afghanistan were seen as particularly important to reach. In the beginning of November 2015, Afghan asylum seekers, with limited chances of gaining asylum, comprised the second largest group crossing into Norway across the southern border with

Sweden and the northern border with Russia. Parallel to the Facebook campaign, messages were disseminated through other media and on other digital platforms, including half-page advertisements in three major Afghan newspapers and continuous communication on the webpages of Norwegian embassies.

The choice of target group involved a fine balance. Persons who did have a valid claim for asylum should in principle not be targeted. To reach out to such persons could arguably be regarded as a break with Norway's commitment as signatories to the UNHCR 1951 Refugee Convention. In our interviews, however, the informants were mixed in their opinions on whether refugees—meaning groups that have a right to asylum if an application is forwarded in Norway—should also be included in the target groups. This was clearly a sensitive issue, related to the legitimacy of the campaign. 'The campaign was not directed towards Syrians, or others with a claim to asylum', one civil servant pointed out. On the other hand, they realized that even some individual Afghan and Eritrean men that were included in the target group may have been qualified for asylum.

The target group specified by the communication team and approved by the Department of Immigration within the Ministry of Justice could therefore be said to violate the formulated principle of the campaign of not reaching out to persons with a claim to asylum in Norway. During the 2010–2015 period Eritreans have been a group with a 90 percent plus approval rate in Norway. This emphasizes the overarching goal of the government at the height of the 2015 refugee crisis: to regain control over Norway's borders.⁸ Including Eritreans among the targeted nationalities, in other words, reflected the current policy goal of stemming all asylum arrivals, regardless of probability of approval.

3.4 The message—getting the facts right (enough)

The mantra for the Stricter campaign was to present factual information about the immigration regulations in Norway. In a separate banner on the right-hand side of the page, the following was made explicit: 'This page is managed by The Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security to present factual information about Norwegian asylum policy' (from the Facebook page 'Stricter asylum regulations in Norway').

Informants conveyed how they quickly encountered the challenges of untangling and demarking what is factual information. They also experienced the challenges of presenting factual information efficiently in social media while adapting to the requirements of the chosen medium.

The Stricter team started out by simply quoting the current regulations and expected changes. The first posts included the list of suggested restrictive changes, the post directly referring to Afghan migrants and the point that not all asylum seekers qualify according to the UN Refugee Convention: 'People whose applications are denied must return to their country of habitual residence. If you do not leave voluntarily, you will be returned by force' (Post 6 November 2015. Facebook page 'Stricter asylum regulations in Norway').

After the comment option had been withdrawn, messages in languages other than Norwegian and English dominated. Separate posts could be pushed using a range of languages, including Dari, Pashto, Arabic and Tigray. All posts directed the reader to further information at the main government web-platform, regjeringen.no.

Stricter asylum regulations in Norway
26. november 2015 · 🌐

Are you entitled to asylum in Norway?
Planning to go via Russia?
[Se oversettelse](#)

Norway is now rejecting applications from asylum seekers after having resided in Russia
Rejected applicants will be rapidly returned to Russia.

GOVERNMENT.NO [Finn ut mer](#)

Liker Kommenter Del

Figure 2. Example posting on campaign's Facebook page.

In hindsight, the underlying message of the campaign in these hectic first weeks was clear to one of our informants: 'In the beginning we only had one message: Don't come here!' (Civil servant, interview).

By the end of November 2015, the number of weekly arrivals was falling rapidly, and the messages on the Stricter page became more specific. For example, they included information on increased border controls and new practices on the Russian border, such as shown in Figure 2.

3.5 Stricter campaign 2.0

By March 2016, a record few asylum seekers were coming to Norway, following the EU–Turkey deal on migration management and the closing of national borders en route to Norway. Yet, the number of future arrivals was still uncertain, and the campaign continued.

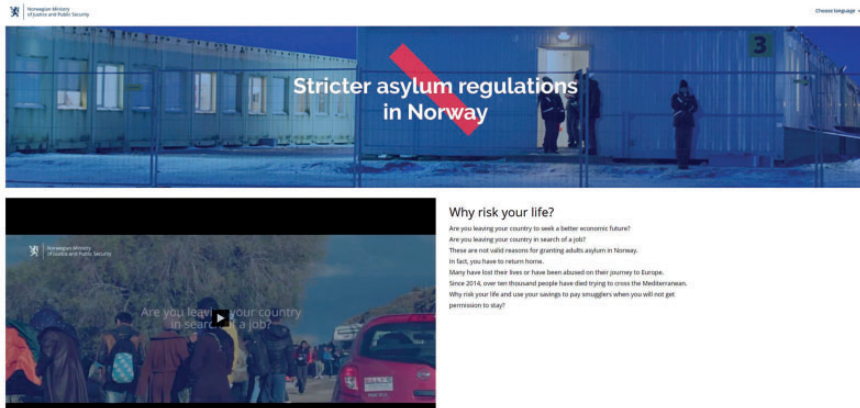


Figure 3. Posting on campaign page promoting information videos.

The communication team within the Ministry of Justice became aware of campaigns in other countries that used what was perceived as possibly more efficient communication tools. These included videos with a more direct form of language aimed at stirring emotions, such as Australia’s ‘No Way’ campaign⁹ and direct testimonials from migrants: ‘We would have liked to use more of the stories showing individuals saying how “disappointed we are” and linked them to the Facebook page. However, we cannot use identifiable persons in our communication’ (Civil servant, interview).

While continuing to post on the Stricter Facebook page, the team therefore explored how the campaign could be developed further; searching for a format they felt was both effective and sufficiently precise. ‘We had a fact-based message. We know there are messages that will be more effective, that will hit you in the stomach and heart, but we cannot use those. Like Australia did in the No Way campaign [. . .]. We cannot do that, given the mandate of our ministry’ (Civil servant, interview).

This informant pointed to the direct tone used in the Australian campaign, a personal tone—an ‘I am talking to you’ approach—evaluated as more effective from a communication standpoint. The civil servants discussed among themselves how to attain communicative effectiveness while not breaching the key norm for government communication of correct and precise language.

The Norwegian team did not want to copy the Australian campaign but still used some of the tools associated with that campaign. During the second half of 2016 they established a new webpage, separate from the government’s main hub.¹⁰ They linked the new hub to the Facebook page.

The main content on the new page comprised two videos. In the accompanying text and through voice-over, they communicated directly to the individual migrant. They were titled: ‘Why risk *your* life?’ and ‘You risk being returned’ (see Figure 3).

A lot of consideration had gone into making the two videos. ‘Film makes any message stronger. If you write in the genre of a press release, then add video images, music and voice-over, then it becomes pretty harsh’ (Civil servant, interview).

The videos also included background music associated with the crime fiction genre and strong images underscoring the risks of en route abuse and death. The communication department in the Ministry of Justice acknowledged that these tools were powerful and not without ambiguities: ‘... it just becomes so much stronger, and we were set to make videos that would survive a change of political leadership within the ministry. They should be political, obviously, but should be usable both to our current and potential new minister’ (Civil servant, interview).

Given the strong new context of the messages, there were reactions from both the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from the Department of Immigration within the Ministry of Justice. This resulted in a few changes to the wording. For example, the text had to be precise in that children were not targeted. The text of the first video was explicitly directed at adult asylum seekers. Children were to be excluded from the target group: ‘Are you leaving your country to seek a better economic future? Are you leaving your country in search of a job? These are not valid reasons for granting *adults* asylum in Norway.’¹¹

The political leadership in the Ministry of Justice also gave inputs to the message, the wording and the context given in the videos. The communications department also had to take these into account while adhering to the criteria that all information should be correct and not have an expiration date.

4. Discussion

This article researches how the Norwegian Government, during the refugee crisis in 2015, made use of new media platforms to communicate restrictive immigration regulations to potential immigrants. The initiative involved new types of government messages adapted to the affordances of social media and pioneering inter-governmental cooperation.

The Norwegian campaign demonstrates the vital, complex and also controversial role of communication in modern government. The need to communicate effectively—that is, to reach out and convince target groups—might collide with the ground rules of civil service information intended for the public.

This is one of several aspects of the Norwegian campaign that is relevant to countries in Europe and beyond. A pan-European survey of national campaigns identified similar dilemmas with regard to comprehensiveness versus effectiveness (Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud 2017). European governments reported that they faced challenges with aligning efficient communication, including format, design and messaging, with potentially vulnerable target groups (Schans and Optekamp 2016).¹²

Previous research tells us that it is a difficult task to reach potential migrants with information they have access to, understand and trust (Haug 2008). Recent trends, however, indicate that new media technology plays a vital role as providers of information for people considering migrating and individuals in transit en route to destination countries. Devices like smart phones and personalized social media platforms have accelerated the speed of information circuits and increased the access to different sources of information enormously for many (but not all) migrants (Dekker and Engbersen 2014). Especially in times of crises, where the need to reach out to people is acute, to make use of new and potential efficient media technology might present itself as the obvious communication policy.

However, the affordances of social media platforms, like Facebook, pose a range of dilemmas for government communication in general and communication directed at migrants in particular. These dilemmas are specifically linked to the principles of *dialogue*, *correctness*, *comprehensiveness* and *transparency*, as defined in the norms for government communication (Kettle 2008) in the Norwegian case outlined in the official codes for state communication.

4.1 Dialogue

The requirement of dialogue, even if cherished as the true soul of social media, poses challenges to government communication (Mergel 2013). When a government agency runs a Facebook page, it becomes associated with, and responsible for, the content of the comments and posts. Any types of insults or hateful speech are certainly off-limits. Discussions related to immigration require instant moderation and hence substantial resources. When controversial issues are discussed, agencies often end up having to cease the discussions completely (Lundby and Torbjørnsrud 2012). The solution found by the Norwegian Ministry in this case was to make use of filters that in practice hindered all user-generated activity on the page.

4.2 Correctness

A central function of a social media platform, like Facebook, furthermore, is the structural preference for messages that spur emotional reactions based on immediate gut feelings, often activated through pictures and videos (Hermida 2014). A government agency that enters social media will wish to spread its messages through ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ by other users. Such secondary dissemination is believed to increase the messages’ legitimacy when received by the third party. The incentive to create a type of emotional and captivating messages is strong. As touched upon by the civil servants involved in the Stricter campaign, the balancing act of adapting to these affordances while at the same time respecting basic civil service norms of correctness is demanding. Among the communication officers followed here, this created a constant internal discussion of how to keep the message acceptable as guided by gut feelings of appropriateness and inappropriateness in the absence of up-to-date formal guidelines.

The informants stressed the importance of making sure that all information transmitted in the campaign was formally correct. However, the informants were aware that the campaign did not promote a complete package of information. It focused on the barriers to migrants and did not mention the other side of the coin—being the rights of those who actually deserve asylum. This information was available on government web pages but was not linked to on the Facebook platform.

4.3 Comprehensiveness

Hence, the campaign could be criticized for discarding the principle that the state should give comprehensive information to the public, providing information about rights and duties, eligibility and illegibility (AAD 2009). Moreover, experiments with a more direct

language combined with dramatic effects in videos undoubtedly speak to feelings, in particular fear, rather than to rational faculties. Again, it is not straightforward where the line should be drawn between appropriate public information and speculative persuasion in these campaigns. A pertinent question is whether practices are different when communication is directed at foreign nationals: Is there a separate set of norms for government communication with foreign nationals?

4.4 Transparency

Another principle of government communication is the norm of transparency and accountability. Governments' social media profiles can involve an unclear identity and thereby challenge the norm of accountability. It is a basic requirement that government communication should be easily recognizable and that the public are able to recognize official information provided by a particular government agency. Given that the pushed posts appeared in the target groups' Facebook-feeds, did people understand that the posts originated from the Norwegian Government? It remains an open question as to how an explicit link to a national government, as in the Stricter case, influences the credibility of the information in the eyes of the target groups.

Social media platforms offer the possibility to pay for the ability to push messages to targeted users. This is another sensitive area for governments wanting to spread their information on social media. The layout of paid ads in people's news feeds appears similar to other posts, and whether addressees are aware that they are actually sponsored is not known.

5. Conclusions

The Norwegian campaign 'Stricter asylum regulations in Norway' played itself out between the imperatives of handling the refugee crisis on one side and the migrants' potential vulnerability on the other. Crisis can spur innovation. In this case, the crisis gave rise to the novel use of technologies and novel collaboration initiatives across traditional organizational divides.

It is a well-suited case through which to study the instrumental role that social media can play for public institutions. It raised questions regarding the mandate and division of communication work within ministries (political leadership, communication staff and civil servants), the content and message of the page, the ethical aspects of pushing stricter migration policies and the potential effects of similar social media campaigns.

Migration is always a sensitive political topic, and all the more so at times with high influxes of asylum seekers. The Stricter asylum campaign was unconventional both in form and content. It was meant to represent Norwegian asylum policies and was premised on civil service norms of information but was launched based on a political initiative to take and show quick action.

Taking a step back, we see that social media originally were surrounded by great optimism with their capacity to enable otherwise ordinary people to increase their communication resources and enable change from below. In a similar vein, social media have been argued to enable migrants to build networks that provide useful information and insider

knowledge on migration that is discrete and unofficial, such as information about the labour market, legal conditions or other practical issues concerning migration to or life in the destination context. Social media have therefore been described as a ‘backstage’ of information that strengthens people’s resources and ability to migrate and hence provides a form of resistance to increasingly restrictive immigration regimes in Western countries (Dekker and Engbersen 2014).

However, as this study illustrates, both commercial and governmental actors have entered the scene, using the affordances of social media platforms to monitor and reach individual users of social media across the world. Government communication campaigns directed at potential migrants can hence be seen as an attempt to ‘colonize’ the ‘backstage’ of social media networks and resources. Messages are constructed to permeate the boundaries of what used to be perceived as protected space, reserved for private and semi-private communication.

By studying the Norwegian Facebook campaign, we obtained access to processes behind the scenes as government actors enter what could now more precisely be defined as a grey zone of private and public affairs. We see the urge to be where people are, to influence and control. As our case study illustrates, however, such efforts need to be followed by norms of privacy that adhere to the specific qualities of new media platforms.

The effects of the Norwegian and other European campaigns still have yet to be established. No reception study has been made of the Norwegian campaign. The actual impact on the target groups’ behaviour is therefore unknown. To understand such impact there is a need to uncover the reach of media technology. The dissemination of smart phones and the internet in some countries of origin is hampered by conflict, poverty and/or government control. Many potential migrants may still rely on personal communication—or conventional media. A reception study will also have to study how the Facebook messages were received by the recipients. How were the messages liked, shared and commented on? How was the information seen relative to other available online and offline information?

More studies are called for to investigate not only the impact of such campaigns but also to keep an eye on the rapidly evolving government interactions with social media. Today, immigration authorities monitor social media in several languages (EASO 2017),¹³ looking for interactions involving smugglers, false documents and new migratory routes. In addition, it is now common for the same authorities to gain access to migrants’ social media profiles in search of information.

What we are witnessing might be a transformation of social media platforms from a once frugal stage of private, backstage individuals to a true ‘frontstage’ arena which serves as a meeting point for individuals, NGOs, commercial actors and government institutions.

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None declared.

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Notes

1. <<https://www.iom.int/migration-management>> accessed 13 July 2018.
2. <<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20170619IPR77722/conference-on-migration-management>> accessed 13 July 2018.
3. Announced in *Newsweek* during the first week of November 2015.
4. Eurostat/Pew Research <http://www.pewglobal.org/2016/08/02/number-of-refugees-to-europe-surges-to-record-1-3-million-in-2015/>. Accessed 23 October 2017.
5. There are a few exceptions, see Sandnes (2015) for an analysis of a Norwegian campaign in Somalia using cartoons.
6. <<http://europe.newsweek.com/norway-launches-social-media-campaign-discourage-refugees-entering-335842>> accessed 13 July 2018.
7. The campaign had the manifest goal of influencing the decision making of asylum seekers, turning them away from Norway. However, the government campaign also served to show the Norwegian electorate that ‘something was being done’ to regain control. For a discussion of this latent function, see Beyer, Brekke and Thorbjørnsrud (2017),.
8. ‘The goal is to reduce the number of asylum seekers coming to Norway [...]’, this formulation was used in the context of a list of reasons behind the introduction of stricter regulations of family reunification (Ministry of Justice and Public Security, Prop 90 L [2015-2016]:8).
9. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rT12WH4a92w>> accessed 13 July 2018.
10. <<https://nettsteder.regjeringen.no/asylumregulations/en/stricter-asylum-regulations-in-norway/>> accessed 13 July 2018.
11. <<https://nettsteder.regjeringen.no/asylumregulations/en/stricter-asylum-regulations-in-norway/>> accessed 13 July 2018.
12. The European survey was administered by the European Migration Network. The survey included 28 countries (Brekke, Beyer and Thorbjørnsrud 2017).
13. European Asylum Support Office: <<https://www.easo.europa.eu/news-events/easo-newsletter-january-2017>> accessed 13 July 2018.

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