

PISA DEBATES AND BLAME MANAGEMENT AMONG THE NORWEGIAN EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITIES: PRESS COVERAGE AND DEBATE INTENSITY IN THE NEWSPAPERS

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Abstract

The Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) has become the most influential comparative assessment in our time, as PISA has induced media debate and triggered reform measures in the education systems of several countries. The programme has caused shockwaves in the educational landscape in Norway, and led to a reorganisation of educational policies. This research sought, first, to explore press coverage and debate intensity in Norwegian newspapers in the wake of PISA releases, and second, to discuss the use of media strategies among Norwegian officeholders to investigate how the media portray cases in which they are involved. Blame management is an example of how officeholders can attempt to avoid blame or displace it onto political opponents. Using their media responses as data, the nature and value of blame management were analysed in relation to a game theoretical framework. Patterns and themes emerging from the data were described quantitatively and qualitatively, and illustrated by direct quotations from political and bureaucratic officeholders. It is important to gain a better understanding of the dynamics in media coverage of educational matters, and how participants in the game use strategic tools. This study contributes to the understanding of the media's shaping of education policies and debates. The significance of the media and the media strategies in use suggest that educational research should expand its perspectives towards how the media influences public opinion on educational quality.

Key words: *blame management, government, PISA, public opinion.*

Introduction

The media represent the most important arena for forming political opinion and the public attribution of responsibility for success and failure (Bovens & Hart, 1996). At the same time, the media exercise potential pressure on decision makers in the education sector in that negative events attract large media coverage (Hood, 2010). Key figures risk being held responsible. One example of this phenomenon is that results from the Programme for International Student Achievement (PISA) have induced extensive media debate in several countries (Knodel, Martens, Olano, & Popp, 2010). The international achievement surveys from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has been used to develop internationally comparable indicators and results that are discussed in debates in several countries, and have contributed to policy making (Steiner-Khamski, 2009).

PISA represents the largest international comparative evaluation of the skills of young people (15 year olds). It was first performed in 2000, and has then been repeated every three years. PISA covers reading literacy, mathematical skills and scientific literacy. It has established a 'comparative turn' (Martens, 2007) in judgements of educational quality in several countries

(Grek, 2009; Grek, 2012), and it has been assessed by several researchers, for instance Hopmann, Brinek and Retzl (2007), Münch (2009) and Janke and Meyhöfer (2007). The OECD has become the most influential international driver of comparative assessment with PISA (Lawn & Grek, 2012; Martens & Jakobi, 2010). Within the high-achieving group of countries (Finland, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, etc.), officeholders may find pupil attainment in PISA as evidence of successful direction (European Network, 2004; Rinne, 2004). Within the mediocre or low-achieving group of countries, far-reaching educational debates emerge (Knodel, Martens, Olano, & Popp, 2010).

The media spotlight on international achievement surveys may reinforce public accountability for educational issues in countries which perform poorly, for instance, Norway (Elstad, 2010), Austria (Altrichter, 2009), Switzerland (Bieber, 2010) and Germany (Ertl, 2006; Niemann, 2010; Pongratz, 2006). No other empirical study of the Norwegian school system has been able to register as much public resonance as PISA. The first PISA round (2000) showed that the performance of Norwegian students was in line with the international average (see Figure 1); however, this finding resulted in shock in Norway: ‘Norway a school loser!’ was the headline on the front page of one of the biggest dailies in Norway (*Dagbladet*, December 5th, 2001). The decreasing achievement by Norwegian students in PISA 2003 and 2006 in the aftermath of PISA publication attracted attention to educational matters in the print and electronic daily press and in other media channels (TV, radio, blogs) over a period of roughly six months. Whereas in the past, the findings of the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 1995 attracted little public attention among politicians and newspapers, the PISA investigations provoked much more discussion.

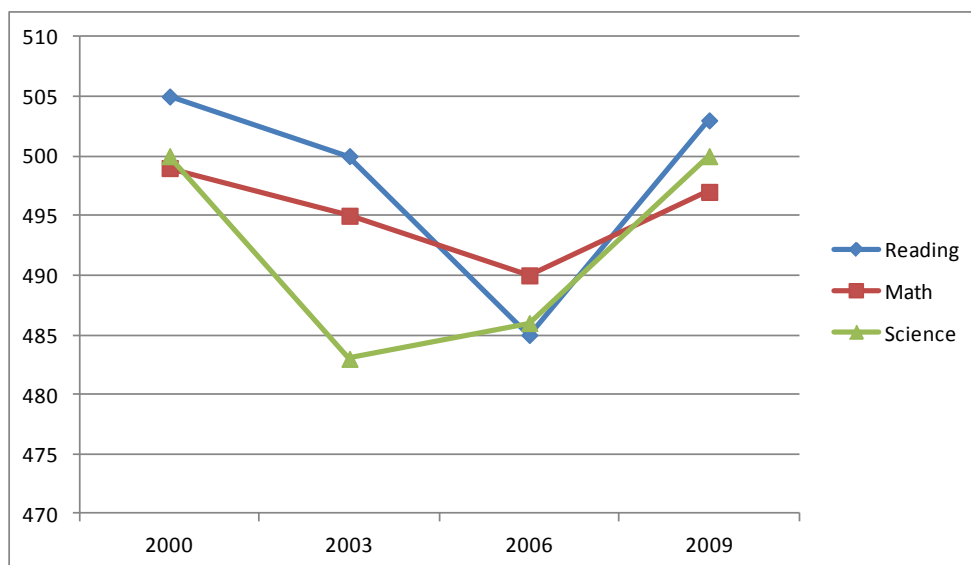


Figure 1: Norwegian PISA results. The official PISA reports of 2000–2009 contain domain-specific scores and do not combine the different domains into an overall score. The final scoring is adjusted, which means that the OECD average in each domain is 500 and the standard deviation is 100 (OECD, 2010).

In this study, press coverage and debate intensity in Norwegian newspapers in the wake of PISA releases are analysed. This investigation is carried out through an exploration of the frequency of PISA coverage in Norwegian newspapers before, during and after the publication of the PISA reports. Research on PISA's effects on the intensity of educational debate and its political repercussions is scarce (Bieber & Martens, 2011; Grek, 2009; Knodel, Martens, Olano, & Popp, 2010), and therefore this study will contribute to filling this gap in the literature. The first research question is as follows: How many 'hits' can be identified in the press coverage in Norwegian newspapers in the wake of PISA releases and how can the intensity of the unfolding debate be characterised after PISA report releases? The second research question is as follows: How do Norwegian (bureaucratic and ministerial) officeholders respond to PISA results (mostly media depictions relating to PISA in Norway) and how what strategies do they employ to handle how the media portrays cases in which they are involved?

Theoretical Framework: Understanding Governance in a Media-Influenced Public Arena

When the press is more concerned with negative events than with positive ones, the question of blame management will arise (Hood, 2002). The negativity bias is explained by the prospect theory: The framing of an issue is seen to have considerable significance for how the public will interpret and evaluate the essential phenomenon that it represents (Tversky & Kahneman, 1986). Negative events depicted by media loom larger in our perception and judgment than positive ones. It may therefore be rational for politicians and bureaucrats to reallocate responsibility and avoid blame. Blame avoidance is a feature that underlies much political and institutional behaviour (Hood, 2010). From this theoretical principle of blame avoidance, the following hypothesis is deduced: Gradually sinking average results on PISA will intensify the educational debate; the negativity bias induces more debate and more intensity in the debate than positive events.

The way in which policies are perceived in the political arena, how mass opinion responds to blame avoidance and how accountability and blame are attributed to officeholders are all important questions in research on education policies. The image of the administration as loyal servants of the people depicts significant aspects of real life. The model of governance via the parliamentary chain (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2011) is too simplistic for an understanding of significant strategic factors in the educational sector.

The provisional theoretical framework of blame management gives an understanding of governance in a media-influenced public arena: Interesting examples of strategic interaction between different parties are revealed in media depictions (Hood, 2010). The political game – to which increased media coverage contributes – creates a constant dynamic of change and strategic noncooperative interplay between those involved, who will have partially similar and partially divergent goals and interests. This can manifest itself as a *blame game*, a strategic game in which the parties involved displace blame or choose other strategies (delegation, nullifying, etc.) to avoid blame as an interesting analytical framework for understanding events (Hood, 2002). Blame-game tactics depend on the structure of communication and the media. The denial of responsibility and the reattribution of blame become the unfortunate result of strategic consciousness on the part of the actors involved. The essence of the questions applied to the educational sector here relates to two central problems: (1) individuals responsible for decisions in the same educational sector can have differing goals and (2) access to information is asymmetrical between the parties involved.

Game theory allows a division between cooperative and noncooperative games. In cooperative games, the parties increase their range of options by means of agreements between them. This type of analysis postulates, amongst other things, social institutions which contribute

to the establishment of or maintenance of something like cooperative games, where cooperation in its normal sense is practically impossible and where fully noncooperative games would yield a result such that society would barely be sustainable (Johansen, 1979). The question of how the institutional framework in the school sector should be designed, however, is a political question for which decisive research is unavailable. Research can only provide information about the possible consequences of different choices or analyses of what has actually occurred.

Strategic games can also serve as an analytical framework for understanding the dynamics of change in the education sector through blame management. A media focus can intensify questions of blame and attribution of responsibility when things go wrong; one way of preparing for this type of question is to put in place blame-avoiding strategies or blame-displacement manoeuvring. The officeholder can choose to initiate press coverage of good news. Due to the decline in newspaper sales in Norway, newspapers expect journalists to deliver more material that will attract attention and contribute to sales. When government departments produce information packs for journalists, it is easier for them to produce the requisite material. For example, when a ministry of education wants to launch some positive news, the press is invited to tour a school. In this way, journalists have easy access to people to interview and photo material with which to produce case studies.

At other times, it is the press that is the active party in unearthing newsworthy information. The broadcasting of negative stories often results in new people coming forward with their own versions, which means that new aspects of the case can be discussed on subsequent days. As long as new information is newsworthy, the story will continue to roll until there is no longer any interesting information left to find. When the press is the active party, office holders are obliged to relate to the aspects of the story which are emphasized. In such cases, office holders have to choose a particular strategy (for example, strategy 1, 2 or 3 shown in Figure 2). They can then expect a consequent dynamic response pattern, the nature of which will depend on the officeholder's chosen strategy. Figure 2 presents a hypothetical model of different media strategies.

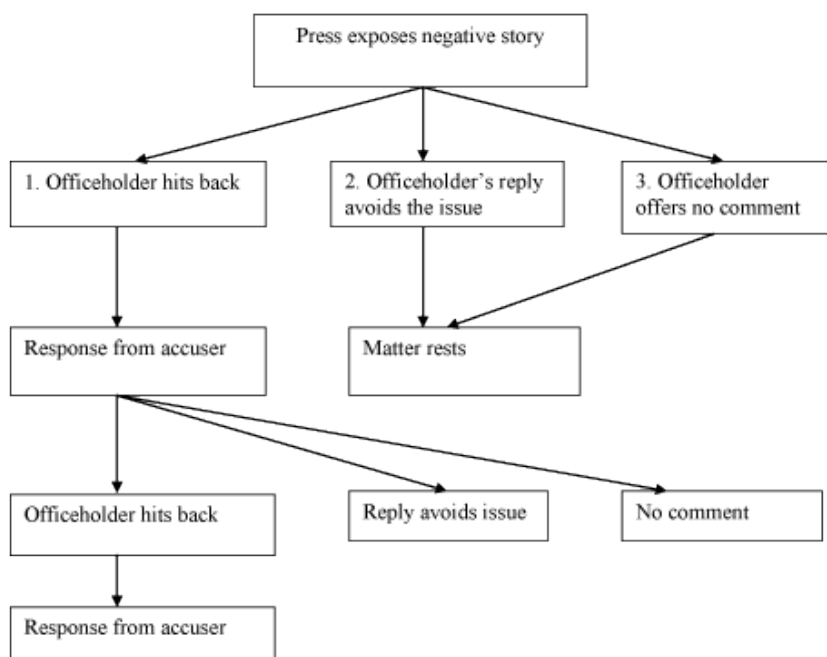


Figure 2: Blame management strategies.

The exploratory questions are as follows: What kind of media strategies are used among Norwegian officeholders to handle how the media portray cases in which they are involved? How do officeholders (ministers and bureaucrats) behave when a media ‘firestorm’ breaks out after the PISA release?

Methodology of Research

First, the study focuses on the coverage in Norwegian newspapers in the wake of PISA investigations. Magazines, recordings, radio, movies, television and the internet are also mass media, but are not included in the data. The frequency of PISA hits (namely the words ‘PISA investigation’) is explored in 70 Norwegian newspapers. Further, the question of how the debate unfolds is discussed. A database entitled Retriever has been used for these analytical purposes (<https://web.retriever-info.com/services/archive.html>). PISA results are published at the beginning of December every third year (for instance, in 2010 the results of PISA 2009 were made available on December 7th) except for PISA 2006, which was erroneously released on November 23rd, 2007. The pattern of PISA hits for the years when PISA rankings were released is investigated (Figure 3). The question of how gradually sinking average results on PISA (PISA 2000, 2003 and 2006) have intensified the educational debate in Norway is explored. If PISA 2009 gained fewer PISA hits than PISA 2006, the hypothesis is supported.

Second, using the media response as data, the nature and value of blame management are analysed in relation to a game theoretical framework. A series of content analyses has made it possible to compare the media strategies of Norwegian officeholders. Qualitative research emphasises a model of investigation that provides an in-depth understanding of issues and focuses on an understanding of the narratives obtained. The blame management strategies in the observed cases are explored by analysing officeholder responses to approximately four months of blame in newspapers. Officeholders’ responses over time are classified according to basic strategy options for those facing media firestorms (Figure 2). After several read-throughs, the codes have been developed into a name that describes the issue. These codes have been reorganised after further comparisons with other texts. Patterns and themes emerging from the data (texts from the Norwegian newspapers about the PISA results) are also described qualitatively, illustrated by direct quotations from political and bureaucratic officeholders.

Results of Research

Investigation of PISA Hits in Norwegian Newspapers

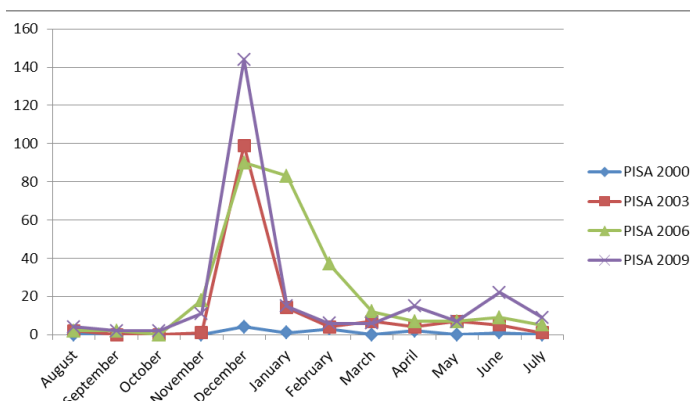


Figure 3: Hits in the Norwegian daily press for 'PISA investigation' (refined to exclude hits for the Italian town Pisa) in the periods August 2001–July 2002 (labelled PISA 2000); August 2004–July 2005 (PISA 2003); August 2007–July 2008 (PISA 2006); and August 2010–July 2010 (PISA 2009).

The baseline for educational debate is obtained during August to October in each year of PISA's release. Just before and after the release of the national rankings (the beginning of December 2001, 2004, 2007 and 2010), the PISA hits increased. The accumulated number of hits in December, January, February and March increases from PISA 2000 to PISA 2003 to PISA 2006 (PISA 2006 was released November 23rd 2007, so I have included the November hits in the accumulated measure), and decreases from PISA 2006 until PISA 2009. The low Norwegian results triggered heated debates about what is wrong with the Norwegian school system and how it system should be changed. The PISA hits (and attribution of blame) in Norway was especially vital in the aftermath of PISA 2006: 222 hits from December 2007 to March 2008, in contrast to 171 hits from December 2010 to March 2011. The debate after PISA 2006 was more long-lasting than the debate after PISA 2000, 2003 and 2009. The debate intensity was higher after PISA 2006 than after PISA 2009. Therefore, the hypothesis of negativity bias is supported.

Exploring the Use of Media Strategies among Norwegian Officeholders to Handle How the Media Portray Cases in Which They Are Involved

Who is to blame for the low performance of Norwegian 15 year olds in the PISA rankings? The climate for blame attribution became extremely intense during the months following the release of PISA 2006, and politicians and officials in the educational sector geared up their strategies for passing on blame. A content analysis shows that the intensity of blame in public opinion has grown over time in relation to the decreasing attainment measured against international standardised assessments in education. One example of media response is that of Petter Skarheim, director of the Norwegian Directorate of Education and Training (NDET), who stated the following at a press conference about the results of PISA 2006 (released in December 2007):

The results of the first PISA survey (2000) came as a bolt out of the blue for the Norwegian authorities. They had reckoned on Norway being the best in OECD. The Head of NDET also said that there was no documentation indicating a worsening in knowledge before PISA 2000 (Gjerdåker, 2008).

This is a doubtful ‘truth’, because Norway had, for instance, the lowest score of all European countries 11 years previously in TIMSS 1995 (8- to 9-year-old pupils) (Lie, Kjærnsli, & Brekke, 1997). TIMSS 1995 did not attract media attention, however, while PISA 2000 was visibly present in the media. PISA 2000 hit the Norwegian officeholders like a rock. Educational attainment was lower than the normal zone of public tolerance in Norway. The level of attainment of Norwegian pupils displayed a steady decline during PISA 2003 and PISA 2006. PISA 2003 and 2006 triggered media firestorms which were manifested in peaks of PISA hits in the dailies. The intensity of educational debate in Norwegian newspapers grew during these media firestorms.

The PISA investigations induced debates with unique dynamics. However, in each media firestorm three phases are identifiable via content analysis of commentaries in the newspapers. A common pattern in these media firestorms emerged in relation to declining PISA results in Norway. First, politicians positioned themselves via blame shuffling or other tactics. Second, bureaucratic officeholders chose media tactics. Third, other voices responded (teachers, teacher unions, citizens). The first shock phase typically consisted of journalists and opposition politicians assigning blame. This phase is often driven by the press spotlight and by the manoeuvring of politicians on the public stage.

When something goes wrong and the attention of the mass media is focussed on a failure, the question of who is to blame is inevitably just around the corner in terms of media dramatisation. Generally, the media are not satisfied until someone takes responsibility. When a media storm takes place, there is often a kind of game – a blame game – which is used to establish who should be the scapegoat. Often, the storm does not die down until someone is nominated (Girard, 1986).

For the Centre-Conservative government (2001–5), the PISA shock of December 2001 was ‘a heaven-sent gift’ (Bergesen, 2006): PISA 2000 and 2003 lent legitimacy to the education policy of Education Minister Clemet, including the new ‘Knowledge Promotion’ programme with its devolved responsibility and performance controlled by use of measurements (grades, national tests, audit, value-added indicators and performance-related payments). These components were the building blocks of local accountability systems within the municipalities. Moreover, for the Labour Party and Socialist Left Party government and the bureaucratic officeholders, PISA 2006 was a rock. In Norwegian education, the progressive movements had held sway in education for centuries among bureaucratic officeholders, educational researchers and major groups of teachers, especially in primary schools (Elstad et al., 2011). The Socialist Left Party and the Labour Party were exponents of a progressive pedagogic ideology in education policies during the 1990s (Koritzinsky, 2000); this involved scepticism towards tests and examinations, scepticism towards teachers as purveyors of knowledge, preference for project work and pupil-focussed working methods in schools. For instance, in July 2001, when the Ministry of Education was led by the Labour Party, one of Norway’s leading newspapers printed an article titled ‘Reform attempts in 700 schools’ (Kluge, 2001). In it, reform in teaching methods was discussed. One of the top civil servants in the Ministry of Education and Research, Director General Ole Briseid, condemned teacher-centred instruction and emphasised progressive, student- and activity-oriented teaching methods:

The Ministry has wanted to reform teaching methods in schools in Norway for a long time. Now this is finally happening. He (Briseid) wants more project work, less traditional teaching using the blackboard as a visual aid and more problem-based teaching. To a larger extent, pupils will work independently and in groups with topics they develop themselves. The teachers will be more like supervisors than lecturers, and computer technology forces the development of new teaching methods (Kluge, 2001, p. 3).

A turnaround in educational policy and management was initiated by a Centre-Conservative government. This turnaround involved a new assessment system of national tests grades and value-added indicators. This assessment system moved towards increased accountability based on performance measures (for instance performance-related payments). The Centre-Conservatives were in power from 2001 to 2005. The disappointing Norwegian results from PISA 2000 (released December 2001) gave legitimacy to this turnaround (OECD, 2010). The Socialist Left Party has been in power since 2005, and has continued the Knowledge Promotion programme (a school reform initiated by the Centre-Conservative government). However, the political officeholder finds pupil attainment in PISA as evidence of successful direction: 'The results from PISA 2009 ... shows progress in reading literacy, science and mathematics since PISA 2006' (Halvorsen, 2012). PISA investigations have established a watershed in the discourse on education in Norway and have become a 'sine qua non' of international benchmarking (Grek, 2012). The Socialist Left Party was previously an exponent of a progressive pedagogic ideology, but today, this party's minister of education approves the use of performance measures (national tests) and target management in education: 'PISA planted the seeds of the beginning of a new era for the governing of education' (Grek, 2012, p. 244). This turnaround did not happen instantaneously. The progressive pedagogy's reputation plummeted along the falling Norwegian PISA scores before the Socialist Left Party took the chair of the Ministry of Education.

The blame intensity in terms of PISA 2006 was much higher than that related to PISA 2000 or 2003. Consistent measurements of general public opinion over the whole period are not available, but a consistent measurement one month after the releases of PISA results shows that an increasing number of people from a representative sample of the population believe that Norwegian schools have become worse. Given the question, *Do you have the impression that the standard in Norwegian schools has improved, is unchanged, or has deteriorated during the past decade?*, 57% said that it had 'deteriorated' in January 2008 (after PISA 2006), as opposed to 44% giving the same answer in January 2005 (after PISA 2003). The effects of blame-avoidance strategies can be measured over a period in terms of opinion. One example is the alleged lowering of quality in schools. Who is to blame for the gradually sinking average results in the PISA rankings? Petter Skarheim offered the following opinion:

'This is serious for Norwegian education and demonstrates that we have a job to do to stimulate reading (and other domains) in schools. The quality of teaching must also improve. Good reading understanding at this age is a building block for future learning', said Petter Skarheim, Director of the NDET. 'It is not until the next survey, which will be published in 2013, that we will see the effect of the Knowledge Promotion Programme', says Skarheim. To compensate for the weak result in 2001, there was interparty agreement to strengthen the teaching of reading, and the national 'Give Room for Reading' programme was initiated in 2004 (*Aftenposten*, November 29th, 2007).

PISA has had a major impact on policymaking, resulting in strategy plans such as 'Give Room for Reading', 'A Joint Promotion of Mathematics, Science and Technology' and 'Equal Education in Practice'. Earmarked funding for particular areas of attention (for instance, the National Centre for Reading, Mathematics and Science) gives the public a feeling that something is being done.

The attribution of blame is an integral part of political life (Hood, 2010). Opposition parties generate blame whenever they have an opportunity to do so. When the third PISA survey demonstrated a free fall in average standards, the question arose as to who should be blamed. Labour Minister Anniken Huitfeldt stated in 2006 that the Labour Party had not ‘prioritized the value of knowledge’. Six years later, two members of the Conservative Party quoted this comment; Huitfeldt replied that this was said in 2006, and ‘at that time the Red-Green government had been in power only one year while the Conservative party had nominated the Minister for Education during four years (2002–2005)’ (*Aftenposten*, September 27th, 2012). This is an example of blame shuffling.

Former Conservative Education Minister Kristin Clemet (in power 2001–2005) stated in January 2008 that ‘the bottle points towards the Labour Party’ (*Morgenbladet*, January 28th, 2008), whilst Huitfeldt (the Labour Party has been in power since 2005) stated that ‘for seven of the last ten years the Conservative or Christian Democrat parties have nominated the Minister for Education’. The Conservative Party has declined responsibility for what has happened in the schools; the party leader has attributed responsibility for Norway’s poor showing in the PISA survey to the Labour Party. Political parties readily resort to placing responsibility in the hands of others when poor results are presented in the media.

The events leading up to the Norwegian PISA results in 2006, as well as the reactions themselves, may serve as an example of how interaction between politicians, officeholders and the general public is played out through blame management. The Ministry of Education and the government were informed of the results in August 2007. In the course of the preceding months, the then minister of education, Øystein Djupedal (2005–7), had been the subject of increasing criticism as well as declining popularity in newspaper rankings. In the midst of this situation, Prime Minister Stoltenberg appointed a new minister of education, Bård Vegar Solhjell (2007–9). This was a striking instance of blame management. To accuse Solhjell of bearing any responsibility or blame for the decreasing PISA results in the Norwegian school system was entirely groundless, since prior to his appointment, Solhjell had no part in forming the government’s education policies. Solhjell was an entirely unknown quantity in terms of education politics before his nomination as Djupedal’s successor. Appointing Solhjell as the new Minister of Education prior to the publication of the PISA results can thus be seen as a mixture of agency strategy (a change of ministers designed to take away the potential for criticism) and presentational strategy (spin and timing).

Discussion

A common phenomenon in institutional and political life is the bias towards negativity displayed in the media (Hood, 2002). When the question of blame for bad news is raised, it is in an individual’s interest to deny responsibility and prepare methods that will help avoid the blame or push it onto others. Delegation of responsibility is a classic example. Blame-avoidance strategies include delegation, political shaping of policy content and pure presentation strategies (Hood, 2010). The last seems to be increasingly significant in, for instance, presenting news from Norwegian ministries in which political spin may be employed. This is often seen in the presentation of White Papers, which demonstrate initiative in coming up with solutions, selectively present facts, make use of euphemisms, etc. Another example of delegation of responsibility is the establishment of the National Directorate for Education and Training (NDET) in 2003, after the first PISA-induced shock. The NDET’s mandate was essentially devolved from that of the ministry, but NDET is controlled fully by the Ministry of Education and Research. This means that the ministry can instruct the directorate in whatever way it pleases. It is difficult to understand the rationale for this delegation without taking into account the fact that the ministry will be more removed from public attribution of blame for potential

operative problems by pushing responsibility downwards to another, clearly identifiable, organisation. The delegation of quality assurance to school governing bodies can also be seen as a blame-avoidance strategy. The response of officeholders to blame appears to be blame management. However, political and bureaucratic officeholders have different roles.

For politicians, hard-nosed political initiatives and hard-hitting arguments promote the image of a capable politician. For bureaucrats it is different. If a bureaucrat is forced to be externally accountable for bad news, the most typical reaction is not counter attack, but rather an attempt to disarm a journalist's pursuit (strategy 3, Figure 2). For example, a highways director had to resign as a result of falling masonry in a road tunnel. Once the director went, the press focus on the case decreased (NTB, 2006). Media storms often do not stop until someone has been identified as scapegoat (Girard, 1986). It is uncommon for public servants to go on the counter offensive in public (strategy 1, Figure 2). However, in another case, a general with responsibility for health services for Norwegian soldiers in Afghanistan was dismissed by the Norwegian chief of defence, who claimed in the press that the general had not done his job (NTB, 2007a). The general turned the tables, however, and claimed that the chief of defence 'is quite unsuited to the task and should resign' (NTB, 2007b). The case subsequently went to a parliamentary hearing in which the general was supported by the opposition parties, while the chief of defence was supported by the government (Hegvik, 2007). The case thus became a strategic game between the parties. In this instance, the general was approaching retirement age, and thus had no future career to damage. He was named, shamed and blamed in public and chose to hit back. There are grounds to believe that the general adopted this strategy because he sensed the support of the opposition parties in the parliamentary questioning of the general and the chief of defence. This public servant was therefore guaranteed full press coverage in the parliamentary question arena. This is a very rare occurrence, and it is not found among educational authorities responsible for PISA results. Discretion and caution are virtues prized in the civil service and so also related to PISA results.

There are very fine boundaries concerning what civil servants can do within the political landscape. However, there are examples in which top civil servants have moved over to political posts and returned to the civil service after a change in government. For example, the Family Ministry published a debate book about homosexuality just before the 2009 general election and was criticised because, amongst other things, a politician and a civil servant worked jointly as editors of the book. Furthermore, a politician and a bureaucrat were criticised because the bureaucrat accompanied the politician on 14 journeys in which meetings on government business were combined with party-political events, creating 'doubt [as to] whether the civil service is assuming a role that involves a conflict with its own independence' (*Aftenposten*, November 10th, 2009, p. 2). The expectations of bureaucrats limit the media strategies which they can choose without personal loss.

It is different for well-known personalities, who can choose their tactics more freely than officeholders. In October 2009, when the press made allegations about the sex life of talk-show host David Letterman, he chose an offensive media strategy rather than being driven from pillar to post. The strategy worked: The issue died a natural death after Letterman laid out the issues once and for all in full depth. Letterman stated that he was a victim of an extortion attempt over charges of sexual affairs with staff members – an allegation that he said was true. In joking about his own unappealing appearance, Letterman found that viewer figures for his TV show increased significantly; at the same time, the case stopped being of interest in other media (Goldman, 2009). Similarly, government ministers can choose a defensive strategy in the hope of ending a case swiftly, for example, by giving a statement to the effect that 'the government regards this with the greatest gravity and will investigate the matter fully' (strategy 2, Figure 2) or 'no comment' (strategy 3, Figure 2). Both strategies have a stopping effect.

One example of the 'no comment' strategy relates to the problems of the national tests

in Norway in 2004 and 2005, which were halted due to poor work by the NDET (Lie et al., 2004; Lie et al. 2005). Former Secretary of State Ole Helge Bergesen (2006) wrote: 'We were given unequivocal recommendations from the professionals in the NDET and in the Ministry that the time had now come to introduce the system across the board: tests in reading, writing, English and mathematics on four grade levels' (p. 17). In other words, Bergesen thought that responsibility for the 'nightmare that followed' lay with the 'professionals'. No one in the civil service responded to this criticism (strategy 3, Figure 2).

The media form the most important arena for public perception of the competence of political and bureaucratic officeholders and of the repercussions of policies. For this reason, politicians and bureaucrats are conscious of perspectives in the media's presentation of their work. The media exist to create stories and to direct a spotlight onto phenomena which are new, troublesome and exciting.

As with all similar studies, this research confronted certain limitations from a methodological and conceptual perspective. These limitations are acknowledged, and contribute to a foundation for future studies. To understand the processes better, better theoretical nets for the empirical catch are needed. However, those used here are not suited to hauling in all types of catch. Some analytical frameworks do not provide a universal theory for educational research. In terms of research connected to the educational sector's multifaceted phenomena, more theoretical tools are needed. Game theory is a possible theoretical foundation. Despite its shortcomings, however, this study contributes to the understanding of how and why the frequency of PISA coverage in Norwegian newspapers during and after the PISA reports 2000, 2003 and 2006 increased following decreasing Norwegian achievement in the PISA rankings.

In a democracy in which debate and a free press are significant for public opinion and therefore for political decisions (based on parliamentary elections), the media presentation of news is important when it comes to strategic decisions about the use of the media. The above examples illustrate that media coverage is interwoven through many manifestations of educational politics. They also illustrate similarities between the various instances, even when some other aspects being unique. There is a difference between actual events and the media depiction of them, and media strategies are a matter of how the people caught in the media spotlight present their case outwardly. Over a period of twenty years, there has been a significant increase in the number of people involved in such presentational work in the various fields of politics, public service and private media advisors. This indicates that strategic aspects of information management have become increasingly important. This is occurring in almost all areas of society, and education is not exempt from this. Since strategic media considerations are significant for educational politics in a broad sense, it is important that this development be better represented in educational research. This area of study is in the process of growing, and may contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between media and education.

Conclusions

The objectives of this article were to (1) explore the frequency of PISA coverage in Norwegian newspapers before, during and after PISA reports and (2) investigate how officeholders (bureaucratic and ministerial) employ strategies to handle how the media portrays cases in which they are involved. Several media strategies were identified and investigated.

- The hypothesis was supported that gradually sinking average results on PISA would intensify the educational debate. There appears to be a clear tendency for the Norwegian press to focus more often on negative PISA results than on positive ones.
- The press is an active party in unearthing newsworthy information about educational quality documented by PISA investigations. In this way, the media influence education policies and debates. In cases where the press is the agent, officeholders are obliged to

relate to the aspects of the story which are emphasised. Officeholders have to choose a particular strategy when confronted with media firestorms. However, the results of the investigation of media strategies have shown that officeholders use very different media strategies, and political and bureaucratic officeholders have different roles.

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