

# On the Minister's Tight Leash? Media Appearance and Autonomy in Public Agencies

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## Abstract

Public agencies have varying degrees of self-determination. In the existing literature this autonomy is often explained by sector and task. Although agencies are increasingly subject to media scrutiny and public attention, the literature on the autonomy of agencies has not focused much on the impact of the media. Visible agencies might be more able to resist the control of superior bodies. However, reputational threats and poor media management might tempt ministers to increase political control and decrease the autonomy of agencies, or in other words, tighten the leash. Drawing on a 2016 survey of civil servants in Norwegian agencies, this article investigates four aspects of agency autonomy, and relates this to media appearance and media management in the organisation. The results show that agencies frequently in the written press report lower levels of autonomy, while agencies with competent media management have higher levels of autonomy. This suggests that media appearance and media management should be seen as important factors when aiming to explain agency autonomy.

## Introduction

Extensive literature on public administration exists with the aim of explaining why agency autonomy varies both within and across jurisdictions. An important indicator of the autonomy of an agency is the formal (legal) autonomy granted by law. Several studies have shown, however, that formal autonomy does not always equal de facto autonomy, and that the level of autonomy depends on a number of factors (Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008). An agency's autonomy is often explained by organisational features, sector and task. Within salient sectors, for instance, ministers monitor, control and intervene more intensely (Pollitt, 2006: 39; Ringquist et al., 2003; Verhoest et al., 2014: 247). Surprisingly, even though ministers and public bureaucracies are increasingly subject to critical media attention (Schillemans, 2012), the literature on agency autonomy has not focused much on the relationship between media and agency autonomy.

The literature on reputation management suggests that reputation can be used as a political asset to achieve autonomy from politicians (Carpenter, 2001: 491). The idea is that visible agencies are more able to resist the control of superior bodies (Carpenter, 2001). Arguably, however, an agency's autonomy also depends on how it handles the media. Agencies might appear in the press because of reputational threats, 'incidents that shed a negative light on an organization's reputation, often transmitted as negative media coverage' (Frandsen, Johansen & Salomonsen, 2016: 8). In times of crises and mounting media pressure, ministers might be forced to increase control over agencies and decrease their autonomy (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007), or in other words tighten the leash, unless the organisation can handle the media pressure competently. Agency autonomy can thus depend both on the level of media

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drawing on a 2016 survey of civil servants in Norwegian agencies. We rely on respondents' perceptions of various aspects of autonomy and relate this to actual and perceived media appearances and media management. The multilevel analysis shows that agencies frequently in the written press have lower levels of autonomy, while agencies with competent media management have higher levels of autonomy. The article helps fill a gap in the literature aiming to explain agency autonomy (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004, 2010), and suggests that media appearances and media management should be seen as additional explanatory factors.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, the common perspectives explaining an agency's autonomy are introduced. The possible impact of media appearances is then presented. The research context outlines the nature of Norwegian agencies and the methods and data utilized to answer the research question. The results are then presented and discussed.

## Public agencies and agency autonomy

A classic definition of autonomy is the ability 'to translate one's own preferences into authoritative actions without external constraints' (Maggetti, 2012b: 38). Carpenter's definition of autonomy is when 'bureaucrats take actions consistent with their own wishes, actions to which politicians . . . and organised interests defer even though they would prefer that other actions . . . be taken' (Carpenter, 2001: 4). Some define agency (or bureaucratic) autonomy as 'the leeway granted to public sector organisations' (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014: 239).

In the literature on agency autonomy, various aspects of the multifaceted concept have been highlighted. Some have focused on financial and personnel management (Bach & Jann, 2010: 447), while others separate structural, financial and legal autonomy (Christensen, 1999). Distinguishing between autonomy as decision-making competencies and autonomy as the exemption of constraints on the actual use of these competencies, Verhoest et al. (2004: 116) develop an autonomy taxonomy consisting of managerial, policy, structural, financial, legal and interventional autonomy. In Verhoest et al.'s (2004) taxonomy, managerial autonomy concerns the degree to which agencies themselves may decide on principles and procedures for financial transactions. Policy autonomy is the degree to which agencies may set objectives and choose their own policy instruments. Structural autonomy concerns how involved central government is in appointing and evaluating agency heads. Financial autonomy is the extent of funding from central government and the agencies' opportunities to raise alternative funding. Legal autonomy concerns agencies' legal status, ranging from agencies with no status of their own and that are part of the central government to agencies with a legal personality under law. Interventional autonomy is the agencies' degree of reporting requirements and how subjected they are to evaluation (Verhoest et al., 2004: 107–109).

Some agencies gain leeway through legislation, granting them formal autonomy from their mother ministries and political masters. In Sweden, for instance, ministerial rule is actually prohibited in the constitution. However, formal independence does not necessarily imply independence in practice (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014: 242). Maggetti used the term 'de facto

independence' to denote the extent of agencies effective autonomy in day-to-day activities (2007).

The fact that an agency's autonomy is relative has been established in numerous studies (Bach & Jann, 2010: 450; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Sezen, 2007; Verhoest et al., 2004; Yesilkagit, 2004: 531; Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008), and several scholars have tried to establish what might explain the actual autonomy of agencies (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2006; Læg Reid et al., 2008; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Wettenhall, 2005; Verhoest et al., 2004, 2010, 2012; Yesilkagit & van Thiel, 2008). Some studies focus on *sector* (Bach & Jann, 2010; Painter and Yee, 2011; Verhoest et al., 2010). While agencies within the social and welfare sector are less autonomous, agencies within the economic sector have been found to have more autonomy (Elgie & McMenamin, 2005; Gilardi, 2002). The nature of agencies' work is also said to be key to understand variations in actual autonomy (Læg Reid et al., 2008: 6). Agencies with complex *tasks* will, for instance, be given more autonomy, due to their information advantage vis-à-vis their mother ministry (Lonti, 2005; Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014). Other studies have investigated the effect of *structural disaggregation* from the ministry (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009, Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014: 246), *geographical location* (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009; Painter & Yee, 2011; Verhoest et al., 2004, Yesilkagit & Thiel, 2008), *external multilevel structures* (Læg Reid et al., 2008), *internal (formal) structures* (Bach, 2010; Egeberg, 1999; Verhoest et al., 2010), and *size* (Egeberg & Trondal, 2009; Verhoest et al., 2010).

Several contributions also emphasize *political saliency* as explanation. Different policy sectors are said to have different (political) saliency. Consequently, ministers will monitor and control this more intensely, thereby giving less autonomy to the agencies within such sectors (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014: 247; Pollitt, 2006; Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Ringquist et al., 2003). According to scholars in a formal (public choice) tradition, the more important a policy area is to politicians, the lower the amount of an agency's discretion. Citing Calvert, MacCubbins and Weingast (1989), Ringquist et al. underline that in those area politicians care most, they will make greater efforts in reducing the uncertainty that afford bureaucrats the opportunity for discretion (2003: 144). Saliency is sometimes operationalized and measured through the level of media attention the agency receives (e.g. Askim, 2016; Koop, 2011). Some studies also use media appearances as an important explanatory variable. Bertelli and Sinclair, for instance, find that agency termination is less likely for agencies receiving attention from newspapers consumed by core supporters of the incumbent government (2015: 863). However, few studies have linked an agency's autonomy and media appearances, and treated media as a main explanatory variable. We therefore do not know much about how media appearance can affect autonomy.

The reputation management literature has investigated how public bureaucracies increasingly spend time and resources on branding and reputation management (Carpenter & Krause, 2012; Wæraas & Byrkjeflot, 2012). According to Christensen and Lodge (2016: 4), the literature on reputation management 'reflects an understanding of agency behaviour that places autonomy seeking at the heart of the analysis'. Civil servants spend a great deal of time on cultivating the organisation's reputation, amongst other things to 'accrue autonomy' (Carpenter & Krause, 2012: 26). According to Carpenter and

Krause (2012: 26), ‘agency reputation . . . shapes administrative discretion and bureaucratic autonomy while also shaping administrative choice’.

Within this understanding, a strong and favourable reputation will be used as a political asset to achieve autonomy and discretion from politicians (Carpenter, 2001: 491; Verhoest et al., 2014: 122)<sup>1</sup>. As underlined by Luoma-Aho (2017), however, public sector organization does not necessarily need a strong reputation as this might demand much resources and become a burden. A neutral reputation is sufficient and enables a critical operating distance from the interference of political masters (Luoma-Aho, 2017). From this perspective, the underlying mechanism is that agencies that appear frequently in the press, will have external support from other stakeholders, and more easily can stake their claim as unique contributors to the public good (Maor, Gilad & Bloom, 2013: 583). Visible agencies are more able to resist the control of superior bodies (Carpenter, 2001), and there is a political cost of decreasing the autonomy and tighten the leash of such agencies. For more ‘invisible’ agencies, political masters might more easily limit the autonomy, and treat them as their own offices. From this perspective, much media appearance should be associated to higher levels of autonomy.

However, agencies might be subject to reputational threats, incidents that might ‘shed a negative light on an organization’s reputation (Frandsen, Johansen & Salomonsen, 2016: 8). As underlined by Yesilkagit and van Thiel (2008: 141), ‘media may exert political influence by bringing news, i.e. events and possible scandals, to the fore’. According to Askim (2015: 371), ‘sudden parliamentary and media attention, following some ad hoc crisis, may temporarily place a task on the political agenda, forcing ministers to take control.’ When (critical) stories break in the news, ministries might, for instance, start to collect background information about policies and existing legal frameworks from agencies in order to prepare the minister (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). When the pressure mounts, ministers who normally do not steer how agencies handle individual cases and professional issues might try to intervene and withdraw the delegated autonomy by instructing the agencies (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2007: 509). According to leaders in supervisory agencies interviewed by Christensen and Læg Reid (2004b: 130), ministers were ‘often very distant, uninterested or ignorant’. Ministers were reluctant ‘to take responsibility until accidents or crises occur[ed]’ (Christensen & Læg Reid, 2004b: 130). The underlying mechanism is that the voters will hold politicians accountable for what the agency does, and the minister will therefore increase control if the agency’s actions reflect badly on the political master. This tightening of the leash might resemble the old centralization thesis in crisis management, where critical events such as natural disasters, epidemics, environmental threats, financial breakdowns, acts of terrorism etc. leads to an upward shift in decision-making authority (‘t Hart, Rosenthal & Kouzmin, 1993: 16).

Whether agencies are able to withstand political pressure and the minister’s intrusion will depend on how they handle their media relations. Competent media management, where agencies are able to smooth over potential crises, can imply less intrusion from the minister. If media attention is handled properly, there might be less reason for ministers to decrease the autonomy and take control. In public sector organizations, media work has been professionalized and institutionalised over the last decade (Garland et al., 2017; Schillemans, 2011; Schillemans & Jacobs, 2014), communication units have grown in size

and media work is increasingly integrated in the civil servants' work (Thorbjørnsrud et al., 2014). From this perspective, some agencies should be better equipped to handle their media relations competently and thereby be able to retain or increase their autonomy.

To sum up, based on reputation management literature we expect that a high level of media appearances will give more autonomy. Further on, we expect that competent media management will give more autonomy. These two expectations will be investigated in the empirical analysis, after the research context, methods and data are elaborated.

## Research context, methods and data

The central administration in Norway consists of 16 ministries and about 60 central agencies. The agencies are semi-autonomous structural disaggregated organisations (type 1 in Van Thiel's typology (2012)). These agencies are responsible for implementing policies and providing knowledge and expertise to their mother ministry and the general public. Over the last decades, the ministries have become increasingly involved in policy communication and not just policy development. In principle, Norwegian ministers are politically responsible for everything in their ministries and subordinate agencies, and agencies are therefor under the authority of their mother ministry. As a general rule, ministers can instruct agencies and overturn agency decisions. For some agencies, however, the competence to instruct and overturn agency decisions is restricted by law (Difi, 2012). The group of agencies where political interference is limited has grown over the last 10 to 20 years. Today, complete or partial legal constraints have been placed on ministers for approximately half of the state agencies. In other words, only about half of them now have formal autonomy.

The main source of data in this article is a survey sent to 28 agencies in late 2015 and early 2016. The agencies in the sample are all involved in in policy development, and not just the implementation of policies, or have supervision and control tasks (universities and research institutes, as well as some central agencies, were not included). See appendix for full list of agencies in the survey. Respondents from all hierarchical levels were targeted. The respondents' e-mail addresses were mainly available at their websites, and in some instances, agencies were approached directly to receive contact information. We used Questback to design, distribute and collect the survey. After four reminders, we obtained a response rate of 28% (mean). In total, 2440 respondents answered the survey. To evaluate bias in the sample, we relied on numbers for the civil service from Statistics Norway. Concerning gender and age, the sample mainly reflected the universe (1-2 percentage points difference). Respondents with high educational levels (master's degree or above) were overrepresented in the sample (about 28 percentage points higher).

The survey contained questions on the civil servants' perceived level of agency autonomy, much in the same vein as former studies (Bach & Jann, 2010: 453). In the survey, we asked the respondents to assess the degree of freedom they had when they made professional recommendations, set internal budgetary priorities, interpreted the current legislation and regulations, and implemented policies. These four aspects were inspired by some aspects of the taxonomy in Verhoest et al. (2004) but were further adjusted. Table 1 reports all descriptive

statistics and gives an overview of data sources and the specific survey questions used.

To assess the level of media attention on the agency, we used a two-fold approach. First, we asked in the survey if the respondent's organisation generally received relatively more, about equal, or less media attention than other agencies.

Second, the total number of news articles mentioning each agency was counted from October 2014 to October 2015, an approach inspired by former research on Norwegian agencies (Askim, 2015). Printed national, regional and local newspapers were included in the search in the media-monitoring company Retriever's database. There are huge differences between the agencies' media appearances. While the Agency for Financial Management is mentioned only 24 times, the Food Safety Authority appears over 4900 times. To avoid this skewedness, the measure was normalized by using the logarithm of the scores in the empirical analysis. In the analysis, the valence of the coverage was not taken into account. Separating articles into negative or positive, some scholars previously have found the news coverage of agencies to have a negative bias (Maor et al., 2013: 591). Others found a large share of neutral articles (Maggetti, 2011: 399). However, it is difficult to interpret how agencies, ministries and the public perceive certain news articles. Furthermore, there is a risk of measurement errors when coding for the tone of news articles (Bertelli & Sinclair, 2015: 857). Therefore, only the number of news articles, and not the valence, was used in this analysis.

To assess the civil servants' perception of the agencies' media management, we utilized an item in the survey about how media relations are handled. On a five-point scale in the survey, respondents were asked to rate the claim: 'In our organization, we handle the media competently'. There are clear challenges to rely on a single item, and not investigate the organization's actual media work. The question allows, however, to get a certain picture of how the civil servants rate the organization's overall media work and has also been used in former research (Schillemans, 2012). The average close to 4 suggests civil servants are quite satisfied with their organisation's media management.

In the multilevel analysis we also include a measure on the mother ministry's media appearance. This has not been argued as an important explanatory factor, but ministers in visible ministries might give their subordinate agencies less autonomy. The measure is also based on printed national, regional and local newspapers from Retriever's database, and has been log transformed to avoid skewedness.

To control for the type of agency we separate between directorates with policy development tasks on the one hand, and authorities ('tilsyn' and 'ombud') with supervision and control tasks, on the other hand (directorates = 1, others = 0). The measure is based on the survey and the respondents' reports of their affiliation.

To control for the respondents' position, we include a measure on hierarchy from the survey. The measure is based on nine different hierarchical levels in the organisation.

*Table 1: Descriptive statistics and data sources*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>Min</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>St. Dev</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Source</b>
<b>Autonomy<sup>a</sup></b>	1	5				Survey
<b>Budget</b>			3.26	1.03	1358	
<b>Rules</b>			3.01	1.11	1764	
<b>Advise</b>			3.78	0.89	1771	
<b>Implementation</b>			2.59	1.01	1469	
<b>Ministry media appearance</b>	362	3400	1253.38	750.58	28	Retriever
<b>Perception of media management<sup>c</sup></b>	1	5	3.98	.78	1796	Survey
<b>Type of agency</b>	0	1	0.82	.39	2442	Survey
<b>Hierarchy</b>	1	9	2.36	1.54	2288	Survey

<sup>a</sup> Our organisation has a high degree of freedom when it comes to: internal budget priorities; interpretation of current legislation; professional recommendations; implementation of policies. Five-point scale, perfect match (5), quite good match, neither nor, quite poor match, or very poor match (1).

<sup>b</sup> Compared with other public agencies, how much media attention and public debate is your organisation subject to? Three answer categories: Among the organisations that get the most attention; In the middle tier; Among the organisations that get the least attention.

<sup>c</sup> How well do the following statements match your own experience from the work in your organisation? In our organization, we handle the media competently. Five-point scale, perfect match (5), quite good match, neither nor, quite poor match, or very poor match (1).

Table 2 reports the correlations between explanatory variables. The two measures of media attention (from the respondent's perceptions in the survey and actual appearance in the written press) are positively correlated, but not as strong as one would expect (Pearson's  $r = .23$ ). This, perhaps, reflects the challenge of asking respondents themselves to rate the media pressure on the organisation in which they work. Multicollinearity does not seem to be a relevant issue, as all correlations are well below .8.

*Table 2. Correlations between explanatory variables, Pearson's r.*

	<b>Agency media appearance</b>	<b>Perceived media attention on agency</b>	<b>Perception of media management</b>	<b>Type of agency Hierarchy</b>
<b>Ministry media appearance (log)</b>	.08***	-.35***	.06***	-.41*** .07***
<b>Agency media appearance (log)</b>		.23***	.03	-.06*** -.02

	Agency media appearance	Perceived media attention on agency	Perception of media management	Type of agency	Hierarchy
Perceived media attention on agency			.09***	.04	-.13***
Perception of media management				-.07***	.16***
Type of agency					-.06***

\*\*\*p < 0.01; \*\*p < 0.05 (2-tailed)

N=1698-2440

**Empirical analysis**

We started the empirical analysis by investigating the level of agency autonomy reported by the respondents. Table 3 shows the results of four different aspects of an agency’s autonomy. A large majority thought that their organisation had a high degree of freedom when it came to giving professional recommendations. About half of the respondents thought their organisation had the freedom to set internal budgetary priorities. Here, however, there seemed to be more disagreement among the respondents.<sup>2</sup>

*Table 3. Autonomy and self-determination in agencies, frequencies and mean*

	Does not apply at all			Applies fully		
	1	2	3	4	5	Mean
<b>Professional recommendations</b>	2	8	16	57	17	3.78
<b>Internal budgetary priorities</b>	5	21	24	43	7	3.26
<b>Interpretations of current legislation and regulations</b>	8	29	24	31	8	3.01
<b>Implementation of policy</b>	15	33	33	18	2	2.59

*To what extent do the following statements apply to the relationship between the ministry and your organisation? Our organisation has a high degree of freedom when it comes to . . .? Five-point scale.*

N = 1358–1771.

Claims about two other aspects of the autonomy concept received slightly less support. Of the respondents, 39% thought that their organisations had a high degree of freedom to interpret the current legislation and regulations either fully or quite well. Only 20% thought that their organisation had this leeway when implementing policies. Table 3 supports the impression that public agencies might be quite autonomous when giving their professional recommendations, while the rules and procedures for how policies will be implemented might be



stricter. This finding mirrors the fact that implementing policy is more often clearly regulated; in other words, there are clear rules on how agencies should function when implementing policies (Bach & Jann, 2010). The four aspects of autonomy seem to measure a common autonomy dimension as a factor analysis with a principal component strategy and an open solution returned a single dimension. However, we analyse the four dimensions separately in order not to lose important information.

Turning to how media appearances and the agency's media management might affect their autonomy, we first look into the bivariate relationships. Table 4 reports the results.

*Table 4. Bivariate correlations (Entries are b coefficients)*

	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Rules</b>	<b>Advise</b>	<b>Implementa- tion</b>
<b>Agency media appearance (log)</b>	-.29***	-.03	-.05	-.07***
<b>Perceived media attention on agency</b>	-.09***	-.05**	-.08***	-.08***
<b>Perception of media management</b>	.13***	.10***	.16***	.06**

\*\*\*p < 0.01; \*\*p < 0.05 (2-tailed)

N=1238-1769

The number of media appearances in the written press has the opposite effect of what was expected from reputation management literature. Respondents in visible agencies in fact report less autonomy when it comes to making internal budget priorities and implementation of policies. There is no significant effect on interpretation of regulation (rules) or professional recommendations (advise). The perceived media pressure on the agency is also negative and significant for all four aspects of autonomy investigated.

The civil servants' perception of their agency's media management is positively correlated with all aspects of autonomy. In other words, agencies who handle media in a competent way seem to have more autonomy from their mother ministry. This is in line with our initial expectations.

However, to further scrutinise the relationships between the media appearance, media management and agency autonomy, we included more variables in a multivariate analysis. Table 5 reports the results from the mixed model regression.

Table 5. Multi-level analysis on various aspects of agency autonomy (n = 1328, N = 28 agencies)

	Autonomy							
	Budget		Rules		Advise		Implementation	
<b>Intercept</b>	5.16***	(1.00)	4.27***	(1.14)	4.45***	(.67)	3.07	(1.37)
<b>Perceived media attention on agency</b>	.02	(.05)	.07	(.05)	-.03	(.04)	.08	(.05)
<b>Hierarchy</b>	.07***	(.02)	.05***	(.02)	.06***	(.01)	.03**	(.02)
<b>Perception of media management</b>	.10***	(.04)	.07*	(.04)	.13***	(.03)	.04	(.03)
<b>Type of agency</b>	-.51***	(.15)	-.67***	(.17)	-.35***	(.10)	-.29	(.20)
<b>Ministry media appearance (log)</b>	-.48*	(.27)	-.39	(.31)	-.30	(.18)	-.19	(.37)
<b>Agency media appearance (log)</b>	-.19*	(.11)	-.00	(.13)	-.01	(.07)	.02	(.14)
<b>Intra class correlation (model 0)</b>	12.70		14.47		7.12		15.16	
<b>Residual</b>	.88***		1.02***		.67***		.85***	
<b>Intercept</b>	.06**		.09***		.02**		.13**	
<b>Variance between agencies as a share of total variance</b>	6.81		8.42		3.49		13.47	
<b>-2LL</b>	3143.75		4156.15		3565.72		3346.776	
<b>Change -2LL (from model 0)</b>	659.53***		1018.19***		942.58***		704.55***	

\*\*\*p < 0.01; \*\*p < 0.05, \*p < 0.10

The intraclass correlation reports the share of variance between agencies in an empty baseline model without explanatory variables. For all four aspects of autonomy we are well above the limit of five per cent suggesting that multilevel analysis is required. The reported change in log likelihood (-2LL) illustrates that additional variables at organisational and individual level improve the fit of the models significantly.

Table 5 shows that the effect of the agency’s media appearance remains negatively correlated with internal budget autonomy. As mentioned above, this is the opposite of what we expected from the reputation management literature. The negative effect on implementation disappears in the multilevel analysis. There is no effect on interpretation of rules and professional recommendations. The negative effect of perceived media attention disappears in the multilevel analysis.

Media management has a positive and significant effect on the degree of freedom to give professional recommendations, set internal budgetary priorities and interpret current regulation. This is in line with our initial expectations. The effect is strongest for professional recommendations, suggesting that civil servants in agencies where the media management is deemed good feel freer to speak truth to power.

Some of the other results are also worth mentioning. Type of agency has a strong negative effect on all aspects of autonomy, except implementation. Civil servants in directorates report lower levels of autonomy, compared to their other colleagues. This is not surprising as the minister in general can instruct directorates and overturn their decisions, while the authorities ('ombud' and 'tilsyn') often are independent bodies with clearly stated supervision and control tasks. These latter types of agencies are supposed to be at arm's length from the ministry.

The mother ministry's level of media appearances has limited effect. There is a strong negative effect on internal budget priorities. In other words, agencies living under a visible ministry have less freedom to when it comes to making re-prioritization from one area to another. No other aspects of autonomy are affected. There is also a positive and significant effect of hierarchy across all aspects of autonomy. This result suggests that senior civil servant in leading positions perhaps have better overview of agency autonomy and how much they are controlled by their parent ministry (Bach and Jann, 2010: 454).

## Concluding discussion

Why 'some agencies seem to be more able to withstand or deflect political pressure than others' has been called one of the 'intriguing questions in the context of reputation management' (Christensen & Lodge, 2016: 8). Although several contributions aim to explain why an agency's autonomy varies both within and across jurisdictions, few have treated media appearance as a main explanatory variable. Drawing on a study of Norwegian central agencies, this article has explored the relationship between media appearance, media management, and four aspects of the autonomy concept: the perceived level of freedom in the interpretation of legislation, establishing internal budgetary priorities, making professional recommendations, and policy implementation. Based on reputation management literature we expected that agencies often in the press and with competent media management would have more autonomy.

We find that media appearances in fact *decrease* autonomy. This finding contradicts the notion from the reputation management literature that being present in the news can be used by agencies to achieve autonomy and discretion from politicians (Carpenter, 2001: 491; Verhoest et al., 2014: 122). In our study, visible agencies are not more able to resist the control of superior bodies (Carpenter, 2001). Our findings are thus more in line with standard reasoning about how high political salience can lead to lower autonomy (Pollitt, 2006: 39). Agencies that are frequently in the press might be more important for politicians, lowering the amount of agency discretion. Scholars have argued that not only the actual but also the perceived impact of the media should be studied, because individuals act on their perception of the media, regardless of whether or not this is correct (Fawzi, 2017: 2; Strömbäck, 2011). However, in this study, the self-

reported (relative) levels of media attention had no significant effect on agency autonomy in the multivariate analysis.

Further on, we find that competent media management *increases* autonomy. Agencies that can fend of media pressure in a professional and competent way seem to be given more freedom by their political masters.

Overall, the findings from this article suggest that an agency's autonomy does not only depend on the *level* of media appearance and the visibility, as suggested by reputation management literature, but also on *how* this media pressure is handled. Former research has argued that crises and reputational threats might force ministers to take control (Askim, 2015: 371). The dynamic behind this might be that the ministry's political leadership wants to seize control and constrain the agencies when problematic issues occur that might harm the minister's reputation in the press (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). In Pollitt's words, the 'moral of the story is that, when embarrassments, scandals, or disasters occur, politicians and the media suddenly take an enormously detailed interest in organisational activities they have never asked about before' (2006: 39). If agencies are able to handle the media beast in a competent way, there is less reason for the minister to intervene. This article has not taken a dynamic approach and investigated how concrete crises can affect an agency's autonomy. The focus has rather been on media attention and perceptions of media management in general. Building on the insight from this article, however, future research should investigate how crises and reputational threats that unfold in the press might affect autonomy. An agency's autonomy should thus not be seen as a fixed entity, but rather something that can fluctuate.

Some limitations of the present study are worth mentioning. The article has looked into four aspects of autonomy. Based on the taxonomy in Verhoest et al. (2004), it is clear that such an approach only captures some of the multifaceted concept of agency autonomy. The (absolute) level of an agency's autonomy of course depends upon country specifics and the environmental-institutional context (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014). Thus, we cannot say that the reported levels put Norwegian agencies at particularly high levels of autonomy. Further on, the findings in the article are partly based on the respondents' own perceptions of autonomy. Using expert surveys to measure autonomy has been criticised because the concept is often poorly specified, and it might be unclear what the experts are asked to judge (Fukuyama, 2013: 359). Giving respondents the opportunity to assess different aspects of autonomy, as in this study, lowers the risk of imposing a set concept (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014: 244–45). However, we have not entirely based our assessment on open questions, which might have increased the validity further. The finding that civil servants higher up the hierarchy tends to report higher levels of autonomy, might also illustrate the challenges when depending of perceptions of autonomy. Our conclusions about media management should be treated with caution, as we only depend of a single item from the survey. The measure of media appearances is also sensitive, because we have only analysed coverage over one year.

Despite these shortcomings, the findings from this article should speak to three literatures. First, the article contributes to the vast literature aiming to explain an agency's autonomy. Here, organisational or functional factors are often emphasized (Maggetti & Verhoest, 2014; Verhoest et al., 2004, 2010). This article has shown that media attention and media management can help

explain autonomy. In future studies, media attention should therefore not only be seen as a proxy for saliency, but also be included as an important explanatory factor.

Second, it is relevant for the literature on reputation management. This study does not support the notion that agencies frequently in the press will have external support from other stakeholders and therefore will be able to resist the control of superior bodies (Carpenter, 2001; Maor, Gilad & Bloom, 2013). It seems even visible agencies can be on the minister's tight leash.

Third, the article contributes to the rich literature on mediatisation that deals with changes in various parts of society due to the influence of the media (Strömbäck, 2011). The (rapidly) growing work on mediatisation has also started to explore how the media affect different parts of public sector organisations (Deacon & Monk, 2001; Fredriksson et al., 2015; Schillemans, 2012, 2016). Until now, however, this research has not focused on the leeway granted to public sector organisations (Maggetti and Verhoest, 2014: 23). Based on insight from the study reported here, the scholarship on mediatisation of public sector organisations should in the future include how media might affect also the autonomy of agencies.

It is important to understand the relationship between media attention and an agency's autonomy from a democratic perspective. If ministers in times of crises and negative media coverage increase their control and limit the professional recommendations of visible agencies, it might challenge people's perceptions of information from public bureaucracies as transparent, comprehensive, correct and not politically biased. The results of this article suggest that visibility might imply less autonomy, although some agencies handle the media competently and might accrue more autonomy. However, how the media affects autonomy and threatens the traditions of impartiality in public bureaucracies should be conceptualised and studied further.

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## Appendix

### Agencies in the survey, original name in parentheses

- Agency for Public Management and e-Government (Direktoratet for forvaltning og IKT)
- Directorate for Building Quality (Direktoratet for byggkvalitet)
- Directorate for Emergency Communication (Direktoratet for nødkommunikasjon)
- Directorate of Public Roads (Vegdirektoratet)
- Financial Supervisory Authority (Finanstilsynet)
- Norwegian Agriculture Agency (Landbruksdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Board of Health Supervision (Statens helsetilsyn)
- Norwegian Climate and Pollution Agency (Miljødirektoratet)
- Norwegian Communications Authority (Nasjonal kommunikasjonsmyndighet)
- Norwegian Competition Authority (Konkurransetilsynet)
- Norwegian Consumer Ombudsman (Forbrukerombudet)
- Norwegian Data Protection Authority (Datatilsynet)
- Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Barne-, ungdoms- og familiedirektoratet)
- Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training (Utdanningsdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Directorate of Fisheries (Fiskeridirektoratet)
- Norwegian Directorate of Health (Helsedirektoratet)
- Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (Utlendingsdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Food Safety Authority (Mattilsynet)
- Norwegian Gaming and Foundation Authority (Lotteri- og stiftelsestilsynet)
- Norwegian Government Agency for Financial Management (Direktoratet for økonomistyring)
- Norwegian Institute of Public Health (Nasjonalt folkehelseinstitutt)
- Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (Arbeids- og velferdsdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Maritime Authority (Sjøfartsdirektoratet)
- Norwegian Media Authority (Medietilsynet)
- Norwegian Petroleum Directorate (Oljedirektoratet)
- Ombudsman for Children (Barneombudet)
- The Norwegian Water Resources and Energy Directorate (Norges vassdrags- og energidirektorat)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A favourable reputation is not only related to autonomy but can also be used to generate public support and to recruit and retain valued employees (Carpenter, 2001: 491; Maor, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Detailed knowledge about internal budgetary priorities seems to be limited amongst civil servants. One-third of the respondents opted for the do not know/not relevant option.