

Public social science in Norway: Migration research in the public debate

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Abstract

How do Norwegian migration and diversity researchers experience and maneuver participation in public debate? And do their experiences and strategies fit with Michael Burawoy's image of Norwegian social science and with his model of public sociology? In this article, the concept of public sociology is expanded to public social science, encompassing communication of research not just from sociology but social science in general. Semi-structured interviews with 31 Norwegian migration and diversity scholars from 10 academic institutions about their experiences of, and views on, public research communication constitute the empirical material. The article concludes that Burawoy is right about the relatively high participation in public debate among social scientists in Norway. And his ideal-typical distinction between four types of sociology is helpful in analyzing how researchers relate differently to the science-public interface. Yet the results indicate that his perspective on public sociology is overly optimistic and not sufficiently attuned to the normativity already attached to highly politicized issues in public debate.

KEYWORDS

migration studies, normativity, Norway, public sociology, research communication, science studies

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Science studies show that western countries have different knowledge cultures which influence how research knowledge and experts are seen and used more generally by politicians, civil servants and the general public (Gieryn, 1999; Jasanoff, 2011; Lamont, 2009). Meta-studies on migration research in Europe (Thränhardt & Bommers, 2010) and comparative studies on the links between academic expertise in migration and integration and policy-making (Boswell, 2009; Entzinger & Scholten, 2013; Jørgensen, 2011) confirm such national differences.

According to Michael Burawoy (2005a, 2005b), Norway is one of the countries where sociology and the social sciences have had the most influence on politics and public debate. Studies of research communication confirm the image of Norway as a country with a relatively strong tradition of social science dissemination to the general public (Andersen & Hornmoen, 2011; Carlsen, Müftüoğlu, & Riese, 2014; Kalleberg, 2005, 2013; Kyvik, 2005). One reason for the high occurrence of social research sources in the media is that Norwegian universities and the Research Council of Norway demand that researchers share their research knowledge with wider audiences (Kalleberg, 2013). Another reason is that the social research landscape in Norway is characterized by a large sector of independent research institutes dependent on external funding and on making their expertise visible in the public space. In this general picture of the science-media interface it is clear that certain research fields get more attention and are seen as more contentious in public debate than others. Migration and migration-induced diversity are themes that increasingly split the population and influence voting patterns in Norway, as elsewhere in Europe. Knowledge about how researchers from this contested field relate to the media and audiences can serve as a critical case for a broader discussion about public sociology and the barriers and stakes involved in contemporary research communication.

The two research questions in this article are as follows: How do Norwegian migration and diversity researchers experience and maneuver participation in public debate? And do their experiences and strategies fit with Michael Burawoy's image of Norwegian social science, and with his model of public sociology? The last question relocates a focus on public sociology to a wider group of social sciences. While Burawoy explicitly argues that sociologists, political scientists, and economists study society from different standpoints (civil society, state, and market) (Burawoy, 2005a, pp. 287–290), he does not discuss the standpoints that interdisciplinary research should adopt or the audiences it should cater to. He is quite aware that “disciplinary divides are far stronger in the United States than elsewhere” (2005a, p. 287), and in Europe many sociologists work in interdisciplinary research groups. Such research groups were foundational for the development of Norwegian migration research in the 1990s, where sociology and anthropology worked as “glue” disciplines providing a common orientation for researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds. Norwegian anthropologists in the migration and diversity research field were later, in a manner similar to Burawoy's conception, central to broader international debates about public engagement and policy orientation in their own discipline (Bangstad, 2017; Eriksen, 2006).

Recent Norwegian research on ethnic and religious minority intellectuals, activists, and journalists taking part in public debate shows that they often suffer from negative feedback related to their minority background (Bangstad, 2013; Midtbøen & Steen-Johnsen, 2014). Depending on which theme they discuss, and their gender, religious belonging, and political/ideological position, they may experience threats and ridicule from different parties. These results, along with meta-studies suggesting that migration researchers often are associated with normativity and positive attitudes to migration (Bommers & Morawska, 2005), may imply that migration researchers are easily seen as associates to the minority groups they study and that when entering public debate they may experience similar problems.

The article is structured as follows. Michael Burawoy's perspective on public sociology, and some of the criticisms of it, is followed by a section on methods. In the subsequent empirical sections, analysis focuses on experiences of, and reflections on, how to enter public debate and on how researchers see their role as academics at the science-media interface more generally. A discussion of the findings in the light of Burawoy's perspective follows before the conclusion.

2 | PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY

Since the early 2000s, the debate about the relationship between sociology and its audiences has been discussed according to the pros and cons of “public sociology,” a concept launched by Michael Burawoy in his address to the American Sociological Association in 2004 (Burawoy, 2005a). In his plea for reinvigorating the public sociology of the classics, Burawoy argues that sociology students choose the subject because they wish to improve the world, while graduate and PhD programmes lead them away from such moral concerns onto an overriding concern with improving specific programmes in professional sociology. He highlights two questions which all sociologists should ask themselves: Sociology for whom? and Sociology for what? He further distinguishes between two types of knowledge: instrumental versus reflexive. The two questions and types of knowledge lead to a four-tier table where different types of sociology are defined: (1) professional sociology which provides instrumental knowledge for an academic audience; (2) policy sociology which provides instrumental knowledge for an extra-academic audience; (3) critical sociology which provides reflexive knowledge for an academic audience; and (4) public sociology which provides reflexive knowledge for extra-academic audiences.

Burawoy pays attention to two different types of public sociology: (1) traditional public sociology that is associated with the classics and that builds firmly on professional sociology; and (2) organic public sociology where sociologists ally with civil society parties to work with them and provide better knowledge about their situation. Both types of public sociology “bring sociology into a conversation with publics, understood as people who are themselves involved in a conversation” (Burawoy, 2005a, p. 263). Therefore, public sociology entails a double conversation. Examples of traditional public sociology given are W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*. These works, two of which focus on the situation for racial minorities, were read beyond the academy and became vehicles of public discussion about the nature of US society. Burawoy argues that contemporary sociologists writing in the opinion pages of national mass media about matters of public importance are within this same genre of traditional public sociology. But the audience for traditional public sociology is generally invisible, thin, passive, and usually mainstream.

The second type of public sociology, organic public sociology, demands by contrast a close connection with visible, thick, active, local, and often counter-publics. Examples mentioned here are social movements and immigrants' rights groups. For organic public sociology the goal is a process of mutual education and to make the invisible visible to a greater public. For Burawoy, the two public sociology types should be seen as complementary and he argues that public sociology's only normative valence (as sociologists will have different value commitments) is a commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology. Burawoy (2005b) makes a point of distinguishing between the different roles as public sociologists taken by two of the commentators to his original article. Whereas Etzioni (2005) takes a clear normative position in his public sociology, Vaughan (2005) focuses on dialogue and on bringing sociological concepts and theories to the public in order to facilitate understanding of specific events of great societal relevance.

While many received Burawoy's plea for public sociology with great enthusiasm, several had doubts about the feasibility of the project. One criticism was that Burawoy separated too stringently between the social sciences and their main audiences (Braithwaite, 2005). Other critical comments focused on the difficult situation for contemporary universities and the pressure towards them from governments, the media and other stakeholders. These comments pointed out that Burawoy may be far too optimistic regarding sociology's influence in the wider society, and some authors also warned against mass media's tendency to reduce sociological knowledge to their own genre of journalism. Beck (2005), for instance, describes how his earlier research about uses of sociological knowledge in Germany showed that policy makers and others ordering the research seldom used it. When the research was reported in mass media, however, politicians could pay attention to it and use it to develop policies, a conclusion resembling Boswell's (2009) research about the symbolic uses of migration research among British politicians. Beck argues that it is this indirect effect that sociology can have, and must hope for, in order to be significant for political change. This point is taken up by Burawoy in his reply article to the comments, where he

argues that this is one of the central reasons why sociology must actively look for its own audiences through mass media. As noted, Burawoy seems to be most optimistic when it comes to sociology's influence in Norway and the Scandinavian countries. He points specifically to Norway as a country where sociology is geared towards both the policy world and public sociology and where, for instance, feminism has had a great political impact (Burawoy, 2005a, 2005b).

This debate on public sociology, and its Scandinavian reception (Hviid Jacobsen, 2008), provides a background for analyzing how Norwegian migration and diversity researchers from a broader spectrum of the social sciences practice research communication. Whereas much research communication by Norwegian social scientists is the dissemination of results from applied and professional social science, a significant part also includes more general comments to politics or public debate, for instance through op-ed articles or debate participation—a genre that Burawoy likens to what he calls traditional public sociology.

3 | METHODS

The article is based on content analysis of qualitative data from thematic interviews with Norwegian migration and diversity researchers at different stages of their careers. The pairing of migration and diversity research in this article relates to the fact that most of the research on diversity in Norway focuses on migration-induced diversity patterns, earlier referred to as the IMER research field (international migration and ethnic relations). This differs from the situation in the UK and US, both countries with longstanding colonial and slavery histories and a longer tradition of seeing ethnic, racial, and religious diversity as independent research themes. The interviewees were first phoned and asked if they would contribute to the study and later sent an email describing the purpose of the research and the thematic interview guide. Three of the contacted researchers were not interested in participation, and were replaced by others who wanted to take part. The sample was constructed so as to include researchers with various experiences of research communication. Altogether 31 researchers, who vary in age from their early 30s to their mid-80s, and who work or have worked at 10 different research institutions in Norway (four universities and six independent institutes in different parts of the country), took part in the study. Their disciplinary background covers social anthropology, sociology, political science, economy, social geography, history, and ethnology. Most are sociologists and anthropologists. Of the 31 interviewees 17 are women, 3 have an ethnic minority background, and there is a slight overweight of senior researchers in the sample. Compared with an estimated number of Norwegian migration and diversity researchers which consisted of 120 researchers at the time of interviewing, the sample covers approximately 25% of the total population. The interviews were conducted during the autumn of 2013 and lasted between 1 ½ and 3 hr. All interviews were transcribed.

The thematic interview guide used in the interviews focused on five wide themes: researcher career and choice of research theme; experiences with research communication in mass media (as source, op-ed article author, or debate participant); reactions from discipline and research field colleagues to one's research communication; reactions to one's research communication from other citizens or groups; and opinions on one's role as researcher and societal responsibility. The interviewees were asked to describe concrete practices and experiences, formulated in questions such as "What do you do when journalists call?"

The fact that the interviewer herself was no outsider to the research field influenced the nature of the dialogue. The debate about insider- and outsider-positions in field-work and qualitative interviewing, familiar in fields such as ethnicity and migration research, generally shows that different kinds of knowledge can be obtained by different researcher positions. Interviewing researchers in my own field may have led to the interviewees holding back specific opinions and experiences. The overall experience from interviewing, however, is that knowing the everyday life of research communication in this specific field was important for obtaining quality data and trust from the interviewees. One indicator of the benefit of the insider position in this project was that after the interviews were finished many interviewees said they had not realized they had so much to say about the theme.

The analysis of data is based on the abductive research strategy (Blaikie & Priest, 2019) and has similarities with the method of stepwise-deductive induction (Tjora, 2019). A few theoretical concepts, boundary work, knowledge cultures, and public intellectuals, functioned as orienting concepts, guiding the research from the very start. In the first step of empirical analysis, data-near codes based on close readings of interview transcripts were summarized in 2- to 6-page reports from each interview. In these reports, the informants' own descriptions and terms were central. The next step comprised comparisons of the boundary work practices towards colleagues, journalists, and public pundits with regard to background characteristics such as seniority, work place, and access to national media. Later, such comparisons constituted the basis for more abstract emerging themes such as normativity and I developed ideal-types and concepts in an ongoing dialogue with already existing theories and concepts of relevance. Due to the relatively small population of Norwegian researchers in the field, no information about age, gender, ethnicity, or position is revealed when quoting from the interviews.

4 | ENTERING DEBATES—TROUBLES AND STRATEGIES

In the 1990s and the early 2000s, theoretical and methodological debates among researchers in this field partly resembled broader media debates over migration and diversity. Researchers could characterize each other as “moralist,” “advocate for migrants,” or “advocate for the state” (Brox, 1991; Figenschou & Beyer, 2014; Gullestad, 2002; Hagelund, 2004). Later, along with the maturing and increasing popularity and size of this research field, internal debate between researchers became less intense. Yet different research-based interpretations about, for instance, criminality among migrant young men, or discrimination against Muslims, are when mediatized, often seen by readers and listeners to represent different explicit political standpoints. This means, for example, that researchers communicating positive research findings about the integration of children of immigrants in the labour market risk being associated with a pro-immigration attitude in the wider public debate. Or it can mean that researchers finding an increasing likelihood for youth of migrant background to be involved in youth gangs, risk being associated with the anti-immigration lobby.

The interviewed researchers describe that they often reflect on whether or not to contribute to ongoing political or social debate that directly or indirectly refers to migration and diversity in national mass media. A debate raised by a frequent pundit in Norwegian migration and integration debate, journalist and writer Jon Hustad, in 2013 may here serve as an example. Hustad wrote an op-ed article called “Not my Minister of Culture” in the largest newspaper in Norway,¹ in which he argued that the present Minister of Culture in the Norwegian government, Hadia Tajik, who is of Pakistani descent, could not represent Norway properly since she denied defining Norwegian culture and did not take seriously the threat immigration posed to it. Many researchers reacted to this op-ed article and mentioned it specifically in the interviews. Some sent comment articles that the newspaper did not print. Others wanted to contribute, but hesitated:

Right, how do you manage to enter this debate, how smart will you have to be, how should you angle it in order to get a message out and not just be parked, ridiculed or defined away before you manage to say anything... When it gets that hard, I think no, I don't cope with that. And then there will only be a few taking the responsibility of doing it, on our behalf. Most don't cope. (I30)

This quote is representative for several researchers and refers to a broader sample of debates seen as polarized and not initiated by researchers in the field. It points to at least three dimensions. First, that the frame for the debate is set by others (public pundits, editors or journalists) making it difficult to change the premises for the debate or to enter new lines of thought. Second, the quote accentuates the need for academic representation in the debate—“who is going to speak on our behalf?”—meaning the researchers with expertise in the field. Third, it draws attention to the barriers against taking part: being parked, ridiculed, or defined away. The quoted researcher goes

on to say that if only more researchers had taken part in the debate, it would have been easier for her to join it. Since debates in this field so often “leave the track,” she argues, researchers would perform much better than many others. To her, if more researchers were involved it would be less risky to participate, and also less likely that the debate would lose its factual grounding.

When discussing such debates and the gatekeeper roles of journalists and editors more generally, the interviewees often draw attention to how journalists want researchers to take on specific roles—as expert witnesses of already written arguments or as giving legitimacy to one of two poles in an ongoing debate. Experiences of being asked by print media journalists to confirm or disconfirm specific statements in regard to news articles or commentaries referring to ongoing societal debate make some interviewees reluctant to make public contributions. When researchers identify strong media framings which contrast with their own research findings, many refuse to participate either as sources or debaters. Some argue that instead they prefer to participate in live radio and TV debates as this gives them the opportunity to correct journalists on the spot.

The general tendency in the material is to argue that it is still necessary that researchers participate in debates if they have a general competence on the topic under debate. Several argue that it is their responsibility to nuance and halt the worst tendencies in public debate, or to try to change the premises for debates seen as based on ignorance of the facts in the field. Media-experienced senior researchers tend to argue that they have become more generalist over time and that they do not monitor their public participation as closely as they did when they were younger. Some members of this group see it as one of their primary tasks as researchers to contribute to a differentiated public debate in mass media and other venues for research-based communication such as debate panels or open talks. They use metaphors such as “public debate as ecology” and researchers as “reverse chameleons” to illustrate how they see their roles vis-à-vis audiences and the broader mediascape:

I think a bit about public debate as a type of ecology, where it is necessary to fill some niches in order to get a more nuanced entirety. That means maximum nuances in the entirety so that one can see a topic from many sides. And this is an effort to counteract polarization. (I5)

Over the years, a significant part of my competence has become to talk in a polarized field, because I become like the reverse of a chameleon. I have become rather good at sensing and turning the audience as to which side of the ditch they belong. Or in which ditch they stand. I have become rather strategic in this regard, when it comes to talks. (I2)

This last researcher refers to her broad experience of giving talks to specific or open audiences. She works on a topic that the anti-immigration lobby typically refers to as evidence of the negative consequences of immigration. Her research regularly risks misuse for political purposes.

Deciding to write an op-ed article or to enter an ongoing mass media debate requires different considerations to deciding to give face-to-face talks to open audiences or to take part in face-to-face debate panels designed for a general audience. A typical attitude to participation in mass media debates is that it can be very time consuming. If the topic is “hot” in public debate, one must be prepared to “stay in” the debate and to reply to other debaters. One must also be prepared for normative critique, as “in the political picture everything said or written is controversial—black and white,” as one experienced public commentator explains. When participating in panel-debates for general audiences, similar concerns about critique are present. In such settings, one also risks face-to-face confrontation from people attacking what they see as a political opinion and not “real research.” Some also remark that the constitution of debate panels may be challenging. One researcher recalls her experience of participating in a panel debate with a think-tank representative who initially presented himself to the audience as an academic from a specific discipline. This researcher’s experience was that the think-tank representative had a political agenda, and she argues that she finds it difficult to be a social scientist in such settings: “Their premise is like ... they start from an ideological approach, while I experience that the research I engage with endeavours to

start elsewhere.” Her work and public statements have been attacked from opposite political sides, from anti-immigration activists blaming her for being “a brainwashed person who only sees what you want to see,” to human rights activists accusing her of taking the wrong side in an ongoing debate.

The analysis so far shows that there is a paradox underlying the researchers' experiences and opinions related to participation in public debate. On the one hand, almost everyone sees this as a duty and an important part of the job. On the other hand, there is an implicit uneasiness because other participants or editors do not grant them sufficient authority as researchers who actually know the facts of the field. This paradox intensifies with the increasing focus on “research impact” and the mass media's growing demand for experts as sources and commentators in recent years. But there is also a more profound dilemma here concerning the roles of academics or experts vis-à-vis their publics. This dilemma is inscribed in broader cultural and political patterns and takes different shapes in different knowledge cultures (Knorr Cetina, 2007). In Norway, Gullestad (2002) has argued that egalitarianism, which is a central characteristic of Norwegian society generally, transforms in everyday life into practices of interaction that stress similarity or sameness. Broadly shared ideals of equality as sameness influence assumptions about how elites, such as researchers, ought to act in public deliberation (Ljunggren, 2015; Skarpenes & Sakslind, 2010). One implication of this is that professional elites should not give the impression they are better placed or more knowledgeable than others when participating in public debate. One interviewee who has broad experience with research communication to international media and audiences puts it this way:

Norway is an egalitarian society. It is considered negative to belong to the elite. In the public debate you must act as an ordinary citizen. All points of view shall be treated on equal terms, ordinary citizen, politician and researcher, so you cannot perform with authority. (I18)

Norwegian migration and diversity researchers struggle to adapt to a mass media scene where researchers are wanted and urged to sharpen their arguments but not granted authority as superior knowledge bearers compared to others. They acknowledge the ideal of the public sphere as open to everyone. This ideal is, however, interpreted in different ways when it comes to how researchers should perform compared to non-researchers and to what degree researchers should be allowed to be normative in the same manner as other citizens participating in public debate.

5 | RESEARCH COMMUNICATION AND NORMATIVITY

Burawoy (2005a) starts his presidential address by arguing that researchers begin their careers by wanting to influence and change the world, but end it trapped in the academic world and its hierarchies of professional publishing venues. This argument partly reflects a North American perspective. As mentioned above, one major difference between Norway and the US in this respect is that in Norway much research—indeed perhaps most sociological as well as migration and diversity research—takes place in independent research institutes dependent on external funding and on making their presence visible through the mass media.

The question of normativity is central to how the researchers reason about their roles in the public. They share an idea that their role is that of an expert. But they interpret this expert role differently depending on how they view themselves as media figures. The researchers see themselves as inhabiting a continuum where, in Burawoy's terminology, objective professional social science is at one outer-point and organic public social science is at the other. Avoiding normativity altogether constitutes one outer-point of this continuum, while moving towards the other outer-point implies an increasing permission for normativity.

Most of the interviewed researchers argue, for instance, that they would find it difficult to be a member of a political party and simultaneously uphold credibility as researchers in this field. Those who are members of political parties state that they separate their role as an academic expert from that of a party member. Most also adhere

to Max Weber's ideal of value-free research, although they interpret the consequences of this ideal differently when it comes to how they see values informing their choice of topic, their epistemology, and their communication to publics. Some—here typified as exemplifying what I call a “purist” position—regard the status of social science in the public space as dependent on keeping all normative connotations at bay:

There is a limit for how far we as researchers may go—without compromising our neutrality. For instance, if time after time you come out as the good one, you easily are defined as having a political standpoint. A social critic is something quite different from a researcher—two different roles [...] I seldom speak beyond research results and value neutrality. (I22)

As a social scientist, one does not believe fully in value neutral research, but one ought to... When thinking of some researchers who use expressions like “we and the challenge from the radical right”, where “we” refers to the left and not to researchers, I get provoked. Such expressions undermine the confidence in social research. (I14)

The “fall mine” [trap] par excellence in the migration field is to identify too much with the objects of study. One can identify too much with power holders and one can identify too much with minorities. One must be careful and keep the analytical gaze. (I4)

These quotes indicate a preference among the “purists” for keeping to the role of the professional social scientist also in public communication, and they include indirect references to how the general audience and potential commissioners of research will react if the ideal of value neutrality is broken. Whereas the quoted researchers above have long experience with empirical research at well-renowned independent research institutes which allow free public participation, others emphasize how institutional directives at their workplace give them no choice but to write in a non-normative way. One researcher argues that his institution (not a university) must uphold a value-free image in the public space, and that this increasingly means that he has to formulate his public writings in the form of a “director meeting decision.” According to him, this is problematic, both because mass media do not want such formats, and because researchers should be free to interpret findings in the public space as they see fit. Influencing public opinion means that one has to move into a normative field, as few are interested in reading dry facts written in a descriptive format. Researchers who work in such institutions must follow the ideal of instrumental knowledge directed at extra-academic audiences as a central norm.

Another position, here typified as “pragmatist,” is to acknowledge the difference in keeping social science and normativity apart in this field of research communication:

It is very hard to keep the boundary between research and politics clear and pure. Yes, I try the best I can not to be too political. But it is not possible not to be political either because everything we are involved with is, in a way, political. (I10)

I believe it is important that society also adjusts to the idea that there are researchers here who have meanings and who have research results and that sometimes there is a mix of these, which also is important. It is right that the researcher shall also herself consider how the results could be used practically. (I18)

In Burawoy's terminology, these two quotes illustrate a position in between the ideal of instrumental knowledge directed to an academic audience (professional sociology) and the ideal of reflexive knowledge directed to an extra-academic audience (public sociology). There are researchers who see their position in public space as more informed by what Burawoy calls “critical sociology.” This group may, for instance, aim to challenge normal science and to provide other premises for research and social debate:

Most have a political engagement in the field in addition to being researchers. One should be open about it. All social research relates to politics. Politicization means that one questions things, opens up for discussion, which is important. (I16)

The “critic,” a position illustrated by the quote above, often involves entering public debate with the aim of challenging the premises for political debate. Critics often engage themselves in debates with other researchers whom they may accuse of upholding a positivistic research ideal. The critical researcher may typically question the use of terms such as “refugee crisis” and “illegal migration,” or engage in a public discussion about how certain research questions lead to certain results. Critics who adhere to a similar epistemological position as the quoted researcher’s typically work in permanent university positions not dependent on external funding.

A final position, perhaps closer to Burawoy’s idea of organic public sociology, is less concerned with epistemological critique of premises for debate, and more with influencing and changing the political landscape:

Social science should be an intervention in society. The goal is to influence public opinion, as this is the only way to get politicians to act. (I13)

The quoted researcher prefers to write in newspapers known to have many educated readers. In contrast to those who uphold the ideal of instrumental professional sociology when communicating to the general public, this researcher and others like her—here typified as representative of the “interventionist” position—is not worried about being seen as part of a political space. Such researchers attune to the political landscape, and see the role of social science as providing alternative perspectives to those held by the political parties in power or by most public debaters. In this camp, we typically find senior researchers educated in a period when action research was a common paradigm in social science. Such researchers, some of them managing to influence policy development through their engagement in public debate, are specifically vulnerable to being labelled “activists.”

The analysis further indicates that the preferred mode of research communication correlates with broader theoretical and epistemological perspectives, and with images of how the public sphere works or should ideally work. One image of the public sphere—typical for the “purist” and partly for the “pragmatist”—resembles the Habermasian ideal-type (Habermas, 1984, 1991). Here, public debate ideally takes place in an open, deliberative space in which the best argument ought to win. The pragmatist, more so than the purist, sees this public sphere as porous, constituted by overlapping publics and by power relations that influence people’s access to, and position in, public debate. A third image resembles Mouffe’s theory of the public sphere as an antagonistic space of conflictual perspectives where agreement based on the supposedly best argument per definition is impossible (Mouffe, 2005). “Critics” and “interventionists” tend to have images of the public sphere more resembling this last image. These different images or ideas of how the public sphere works interact with preferred modes of research communication in such a way that certain communication modes and images of the public sphere overlap. The same researcher may occasionally, however—depending on media channel, constitution of debate panel and audience—switch from the purist to the pragmatist mode of research communication or from the pragmatist to the critic mode.

6 | DISCUSSION

The analysis of data confirms that communication of research findings to general audiences and participation in public debate are common practices among Norwegian migration scholars and that they are, in this sense, performers of public social science. Many practice public sociology of the classic kind, of directing themselves to the public as a thin, abstract audience. Fewer perform what Burawoy calls “organic public sociology,” where social scientists ally with civil society parties to work with them and enhance knowledge of their situation. In contemporary

Norwegian social research, this is a position associated with action research and with the role of being a microphone for vulnerable groups, a mode of research communication that many, except for some of those communicating in the “critic” and the “interventionist” mode, consider “too normative” and therefore view negatively.

Yet the analysis shows that researchers relate to their role as public social scientists in very different ways, indicating that the performance of public social science tends to vary more than the distinction between ordinary and organic public sociology suggests. My results from research in a politically sensitive field in Norway suggest that Burawoy advocates an overly limited perspective on public sociology, where, for example, dissemination of professional sociology to civic audiences is not included in the definition. The finding that some researchers are strongly committed to the “purist” mode, seeing it as the only valid public expression of scientific expertise and objectivity, is a strong reason for including it in the public sociology genre.

Another factor that may help shed light on preferred communication modes is the distinction between what I, inspired by Clifford Geertz, call “experience-near” and “experience-distant” methodologies. Social scientists who work with specific minority groups or minority-related issues over several years—and who utilize qualitative methods—also acquire knowledge about issues that may harm the image of groups if communicated to the public. They come closer to the central ethical dilemmas in the field compared with researchers working with survey- or register-data. Debates among Norwegian migration scholars in the 1990s typically centered on this aspect—whether or not to reveal knowledge that could contribute to stigmatization of minority groups in public debate. Researchers who were skeptical about revealing such knowledge risked accusations of political correctness and/or activism, whereas others framed themselves, or became framed by the media, as those who dared speak the truth. Such debates between researchers were often transposed to represent explicit political standpoints when displayed in mass media debates about migration and diversity.

Burawoy maintains that his appeal to public sociology has no specific political undertone, as “public sociology’s only normative valence (as sociologists will have different value commitments) is a commitment to dialogue around issues raised in and by sociology” (Burawoy, 2005a, p. 265). He accentuates this point by illustrating different roles among public sociologists. Some, like Amitai Etzioni, who works with research in diversity and migration, adopt a clear normative role, while others focus on dialogue and on bringing sociological concepts and theories to the public in order to facilitate understanding of specific events of great societal relevance (Burawoy, 2005b). Burawoy does not, however, go further and ask why it is that Etzioni takes this normative role, or why others do not take it or more easily avoid politicization. In his own distinction between different functional types of sociology—professional, critical, policy, and public sociology—there is an implicit expectation that public sociology is liberating for people in and by itself, and little discussion about political framings and readings of research, or negative consequences for research subjects or researchers.

My study from Norway shows that, according to the researchers, audiences often interpret research-based knowledge in politically sensitive fields in line with their own pre-existing political views. Many researchers fear such politicization because it may threaten their professional status. Some also fear possible consequences for their families after having received hate mail and/or violent threats. To researchers employed in independent research institutes, being labelled by outsiders as an “activist” may in addition pose a threat to new research contracts. Researchers employed in regular university positions are in this sense freer to engage with the public in the various modes of critic, pragmatist, and interventionist—a freedom some view as involving stronger obligations to be normative for university researchers.

Burawoy’s argument about self-chosen normative positions further presupposes that researchers have the opportunity to present themselves as they wish in public debate. Social media platforms offer researchers such opportunities, but knowledge about echo chambers and harsh person-related critique may hamper their desire to engage on these sites. Mass media acceptance of op-ed or debate articles, and celebrity researchers’ high profile on radio and TV, may be interpreted as further evidence of Burawoy’s presupposition of self-chosen normative positioning. Quite typical, however, is that researchers do not get their articles accepted by the newspapers or experience that their message has to fit polarized debates or pre-made journalistic frames. As several

commentators to Burawoy suggest (Beck, 2005; Ericson, 2005; Etzioni, 2005) this illustrates a mediatized public sphere where journalistic and commercial developments seek to package research in specific ways. Another, and more general criticism, is that the idea of a public sphere that Burawoy operates with is premised upon, but does not consider seriously enough, how the public sphere is a culturally and emotionally embedded discourse in which certain themes and concepts evoke underlying stories, images, norms, and emotions (Alexander, 2003; Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006).

Researchers working on controversial fields where public opinion is split and the themes are high on the political agenda face specific challenges of research communication. In the migration and diversity field, competing interpretations of scientific concepts such as immigrant, ethnicity, racism, arranged marriage, multiculturalism, and religion are commonplace, both in the general audience and among political parties. Take a seemingly neutral concept like "immigrant." In public debate this concept implicitly refers to non-white persons, and to minority groups much debated in terms of problems. In public opinion, young Swedes working in Oslo restaurants for 2 years in order to save money for their big international trip are seldom discussed quo their status as immigrants. In migration studies, however, immigrant is a technical term describing people who move across national boundaries with the aim of staying (for a longer or shorter time) in a new country. It does not only characterize non-white newcomers as is the implicit tone in much societal debate, and it is not a normative concept as implied by some activist groups. So when, for example, migration researchers write op-ed articles or give talks arguing that the integration of immigrants in the labor market or in schools is going well or badly, this message is already impregnated with long-term cultural meaning. And, accordingly, different publics will react differently to the message. Such long-term cultural frameworks in fields of vital political disagreement energize pre-packaged interpretations of research dissemination in mass and social media (Stacey, 2004).

7 | CONCLUSION

In this article, I ask how communication of migration and diversity research in a country recognized for communication of social science resonates with Michael Burawoy's perspective on public sociology. The analysis shows that Norwegian migration and diversity researchers are experienced practitioners of research communication to mass media and oral publics, and that they consider this an essential part of their mission as researchers. This confirms Burawoy's broader assumption that Norway is a country where social science plays a vital part in the public debate, something that is also the case for interdisciplinary social science fields like migration and diversity. The article also documents how researchers struggle with research communication in a field of polarized public opinion. Among the barriers to taking part in open panel debates, writing op-ed articles in the printed press, or discussing on social media sites, are risks of verbal abuse, politicization, and fear of the consequences for one's family.

I further show that Norwegian migration and diversity researchers have contrasting opinions on how to perform as social scientists in public debate, and that these opinions relate to broader images of the public sphere and to epistemology. On a continuum suggesting different ideals of public sociology, one outer pole suggests that public sociology resembles the ideals of professional sociology. At the other end of this continuum, public sociology is normative, either by the will of researchers, by the logic of a mediatized space, or both. Although all researchers agree that a public performance qua expert ought to build on solid research experience, different degrees of normativity, as well as the range of what one could speak about qua expert, distinguish different positions. The purist, the pragmatist, the critic, and the interventionist, here represent different ideal-typical positions on research communication.

The analysis shows that researchers confront a dilemma. They want to participate but are afraid that audiences may reduce their expert knowledge to mere opinion on a controversial issue. I interpret this dilemma in the light of broader cultural and historical frames in Norway stressing egalitarianism and equality as sameness, and in the context of the political polarization of the immigration and diversity debate itself.

Michael Burawoy's plea for more public sociology is an important contribution to the discussion of vital and relevant social sciences in these post-truth times. However, he does not pay enough attention to the challenges of such public participation and seems to imply that researchers are free to interpret their role as public sociologists based on their own values and preferences. Polarized debate frames, fake news, click journalism, and digital communication that opens the way for ridicule and expressions of hate are among the obstacles that, in the Norwegian case, hinder such untrammelled engagement on the part of public social scientists.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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NOTE

¹Aftenposten, "Ikke min kulturminister," January 2, 2013, pp. 4–5.

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