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‘Welcome to Twitter, @CIA. Better late than never’: Communication professionals’ views of social media humour and implications for organizational identity

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Abstract

Public authorities have traditionally used an official language style in public, but currently social media have become an outlet for humour. This article uses position-ing analysis to discuss challenges that use of humour poses for the identity of public organizations. Drawing on interviews with communications professionals working in the emergency services sector, the article suggests six evaluative themes that factor into organizational identity construction, such as the frequency and type of humour in social media posts. Indeed, while humour helps fashion more flexible and risk-taking organizational identities, it can also stand contrary to a bureaucratic ethos of public servanthip and equal treatment. Dilemmas thus arise for public authorities that seek to adjust to the times and still remain ‘in character’. The article contributes to organizational identity research by considering the hitherto overlooked immersion of social media use, humour and organizational identity formation.

Keywords

Communication professionals, discourse, humour, organizational identity, positioning analysis, public authorities, social media

Introduction

Public authorities have begun to use less formal language and even humour in social media (Fraustino and Ma, 2015). One such case is the Dover police officer who was watched by millions on YouTube as he sang and moved to Taylor Swift’s *Shake it Off*

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while driving his car (Dover Police, 2015). This light-hearted and humanized view of an officer presented a very different public view of the police force at a time when they had been associated in the US media with racism and violence relating to police killings of unarmed black men. In Europe, the Spanish police have gained a large following for their use of humour in their Twitter posts (Minder, 2014). In Norway, funny tweets produced by the police have been published in book form and won them social media awards (Bakkemoen, 2014). One of these playful tweets, where the Norwegian security police welcomed the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to Twitter, is used in the title of this article. In the social media landscape, arguably more than ever before, organizational identity involves questions like “Is this who we really are as an organization?” or, more provocatively, “Is this who we are becoming as an organization?” or even “Is this who we want to be?” (Gioia et al., 2000: 76). These instances of use of humour point to the way that new forms of engagement and organizational communication are required.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, this article explores how communications professionals (N = 14) working across the Norwegian emergency services sector position themselves and others as regards the use of humour in social media. The interviews are used to analyse the sense-making and negotiation involved in current organizational identity construction.

The communication and identities of public authorities are particularly deserving of research attention. Public institutions enjoy democratic legitimacy on grounds of their bureaucratic ethos (Du Gay, 2000), including objectivity, procedural justice and thus a certain personal detachment on the part of their personnel. But on the other hand, it is clear that they are also striving to become more flexible and risk-taking as opposed to bureaucratically stiff and risk-averse (O'Malley, 2004), as can be seen in the police force use of humour on Twitter. This clearly involves contradictory requirements. The interview study presented in this article, focusing on narratives of emergency services' use of humour in social media, can throw light on the current identity aspirations and dilemmas of public authorities, and how communications professionals stand in the midst of the changes.

There is a significant body of research into the shaping of organizational identities as regards the influence of narratives and discursive resources (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997; Manuti and Mininni, 2013; Oostendorp and Jones, 2015). Research on humour has also added important insights into employee relations within the workplace (Collinson, 2002; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005; Westwood and Johnston, 2013). However, there is little research that bridges these two areas and specifically as regards social media. This article addresses the need for such research, contributing insights into shifts and continuities in organizational identity (Golant et al., 2015; Guowei, 2011) as well as control and resistance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Westwood and Johnston, 2012). The article argues that the use of social media involves new kinds of negotiation and gradual changes in organizational identities. This involves a process whereby both communication professionals and other employees are able to reach new kinds of audiences, viewers and communities, while their social media practices and spaces also become subject to attempts to exert organizational control.

Humour in organizational communication

The following sections will review research on organizations and humour, identity and social media. This study views humour as ‘a rich and multi-functional discursive strategy’ (Holmes and Schnurr, 2005: 144) which mainly functions by suddenly relating elements that are seen as incongruous, requiring listeners to ‘make an abrupt cognitive reorganization’ (Billig, 2005: 65). Humour ranges from witty playfulness that cultivates solidarity and belongingness, to humiliating ridicule. It can help to both establish and resist superior–inferior relations. Commenting on present-day culture, Billig (2005) argues that humour is more widely accepted than ever before: ‘In this cultural climate few would wish to appear stuffy, old fashioned and, heaven forbid, puritan. [...] The attractive quality is naughtiness, not haughtiness’ (pp. 240–241).

Some organizational communication research has foregrounded humour, identity and discourse. Two of its more significant contributors, Janet Holmes (Holmes, 2000, 2007; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005) and David Collinson (Collinson, 1988, 2002, 2010), have demonstrated how humour is used and managed in multiple and complex ways. They have shown that humour can enhance certain organization members’ dominance and the subordination of others. But humour can also be a means to resist power asymmetries and inequalities. The use of ridicule and banter is a part of these social relations, and particularly often in male-dominated jobs and industries. Indeed, the use of humour varies greatly between different workplaces in both frequency and type (Holmes and Schnurr, 2005). Humour can be used creatively to achieve both relational goals (e.g. collegiality, solidarity, belonging) and work objectives (e.g. brain-storming for solutions) (Holmes, 2007). Some actors use humour clearly to their advantage, such as when political leaders ‘construct and project a public image as confident, “folksy,” and approachable’ (Collinson, 2010: 1071). While the aforementioned research by Collinson and Holmes focuses mainly on individuals as part of class and gender categories, most research on organizational identity sets its focus on the abstract entity of the organization.

Organizational identity

Emphasizing stability, Albert and Whetten (1985) first defined organizational identity as the characteristics of an organization that its members collectively perceive to be important, unique and persistent. When an organization operates in the worst way, it acts ‘out of character’ and in conflict with the characteristics that constitute its identity (Czarniawska, 1997). For public authorities in general, who are the focus of the present study, core characteristics relate to a bureaucratic ethos of the ability to serve the community and enact procedural fairness and equal treatment of people (Du Gay, 2000).

In contrast to seeing identity as stable, Gioia et al. (2000) reconceptualized organizational identity as ‘a potentially precarious and unstable notion, frequently up for redefinition and revision by organization members’ (p. 64). Continuously, the organization is compared and shaped through various stakeholders’ evaluations. Accordingly, Kodeih and Greenwood (2014) argue that identity aspirations may be more important than past core characteristics. Also, organizational identity may differ across different

hierarchical levels (Ezzamel et al., 2001) and change over time in style, modality and social actor representation (Richardson and Langford, 2015). Representing a middle ground, Golant et al. (2015) demonstrate that organizational identity is constructed through the dynamic use of both core values of the past and present-day identity aspirations. Identity aspirations of public institutions have come to include being market oriented, as reflected in a risk-taking, entrepreneurial and customer-oriented approach (O'Malley, 2004). As evidenced by several campaigns (cf. Dover Police, 2015; Fraustino and Ma, 2015), there is also a willingness to gain visibility in the midst of competition and rapidly changing media.

Managerial attempts at establishing new discourses and subjectivities in organizations have implicated changes and sometimes threats to professional and individual identities, and competition for identification (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Rasmussen, 2011). The use of new technologies of communication affects the unfolding of some of these processes and how they should be understood.

Organizations and social media

The key common feature of social media is that they all have an application that affords users 'two-way interaction with an audience, beyond any specific recipient' (Hogan and Quan-Haase, 2010: 310). Another characteristic that has driven social media's growth is its potential for 'ordinary people' to represent themselves (Thumim, 2012), which applies to organizational members and organizations as well (Leonardi et al., 2013). However, this characteristic of our digital culture is under-researched in the area of organizational identity. For the most part, research has assumed that senior management is the organizational interest group that controls the organization's official and public articulation of identity through its privileged power over 'material and informational resources' (Rodrigues and Child, 2008), whereas employees lower in the hierarchy are potent in their ability to shape group identity and possibly resist management initiatives (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Ezzamel et al., 2001; Westwood and Johnston, 2012), but hardly with repercussions and visibility outside of their department or publicly in the name of the organization.

However, as recent research into social media shows, the use of digital communication technologies is changing working life. It makes the boundaries of work and leisure time blurred (Fieseler et al., 2015; Gregg, 2011), providing for the spreading of potentially multiple, diverse representations of the organization. For instance, some organizations engage in up to 30,000 public social media conversations every week (Dijkmans et al., 2015) with potentially varying identity effects. Employee communication via social media traverses traditional spaces of the organization and bridges internal and external communication (Leonardi et al., 2013). An internal sub-culture may therefore become highly visible in public.

Moreover, the style of social-mediated communication differs from other public or intra-organizational communication in that it allows for a more personalized, informal and humorous tone, which some organizations are clearly embracing (Fraustino and Ma, 2015). Various social media practices may thus contribute to what Putnam

and Fairhurst (2015) term processes of order and disorder, and organization and dis-organization – and to the formation and negotiation of organizational identities.

Table 1. Overview of organizations and interview respondents.

Organizations	Respondents
Police Security Service (PST)	1 Communications director 2 Communications officer
Health Directorate	3 Communications director 4 Communications advisor
Police Directorate	5 Communications director 6 Communications advisor
National Security Authority (NSM)	7 Communications director 8 Communications advisor
Oslo Police District	9 Communications director 10 Press manager 11 Chief of emergency centre 12 Communications officer
Oslo Fire Brigade	13 Communications manager 14 Communications advisor

Thus, social media constitute platforms where organizational identity projects are woven together with relationship building – with potentially multiple contributors and publics – where humour can constitute a contributing discursive strategy. It is at this intersection where the present study attempts to fill a gap in the literature.

Methodology

As part of a larger research project on how social media use affects and changes organizations' risk communication (e.g. Rasmussen, 2015), several Norwegian security and emergency authorities were contacted. Semi-structured interviews (Spradley, 1979) were chosen in order to investigate sense-making regarding organizational uses of social media. Based on the principle of interviewing those with the most experience with planned social media work, I contacted communications directors to set up interviews. In addition to asking them, I also asked to have an interview with the employees who worked mostly with social media. Six organizations replied supportively. After conducting 14 interviews, each lasting between 33 and 75 minutes with an average of 48, the material contained sufficient detail and variation (cf. Creswell, 1998) for exploring positionings regarding social media use and humour (Table 1).

All interviews were conducted in person at the respondent's place of work. Identity-relevant talk and narratives of the use of humour in social media appeared in most of the interviews and particularly often with the Oslo police. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and excerpts for detailed analysis were translated by the author from Norwegian to English. In response to certain criticisms that have been raised against the use of interviews, I try to ensure that the interviewer is not made invisible

and that conversations are represented in enough detail, and not as short, fragmentary statements (Potter and Hepburn, 2005).

The study uses the concept of positioning, first defined by Davies and Harré (1990) as a discursive practice ‘whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and intersubjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines’ (p. 48). Thus, the progression of discursive accounts reveals how participants position themselves, their organization and others thematically and relationally. The analysis of positioning will first attempt to examine which social actors are constructed within the reported events (Bamberg, 2005) through interviewees’ use of pronominal choices and categorization, but also what Michail Bakhtin termed heteroglossic speech – when the speaker represents the viewpoints of other putative actors (Martin and White, 2005). Second, the analysis draws attention to evaluative themes – how certain qualities and types of behaviour are assigned to social actors and how they are evaluated. Some may be positioned as protagonists and others as antagonists (Bamberg, 1997). These evaluations are produced through the way the speaker judges, proclaims, disclaims, intensifies, de-intensifies, uses metaphors and so on (Martin and White, 2005). Third, I attempt to explain how certain rules, norms and identities are both endorsed and denounced (Korobov, 2010: 274) and what is at stake (Bamberg, 2005). The study thus builds from micro-level analysis of meaning-making, to suggest meso-level themes and relationships (see Figure 1), to contribute to theory development.

The interview excerpts include both the original Norwegian transcription and the English translation. They were transcribed using some of the Jeffersonian conventions (Jefferson, 2004) summarized in the transcription key below:

(.)	A micro pause
(2.0)	A longer timed pause
[word]	Brackets show where overlapping speech begins and ends
>word<	Arrows pointing inwards surround faster speech
<word>	Arrows pointing outwards surround slower speech
<u>Word</u>	Underlined parts are louder than the surrounding speech
.hh	In-breath
Hh	Out-breath
Wo::rd	Colons denote prolongation of the preceeding syllable
-	A dash denotes that a word is quickly cut off
(laughter)	The participant laughs
?	A rise in pitch indicating a question
‘word’	Quotation marks denote reported speech

Results

This results section will analyse in detail six interview excerpts. A number of evaluative themes regarding social media use and humour are useful to keep in mind as they influence each other and factor into organizational identity construction (see Figure 1). The evaluative themes consist of the following: (1) if the use of humour is an exemption or frequent; (2) the type of humour adopted, ranging from innocent self-irony to provocative ridicule; (3) the level of discourse formality, ranging from casual and entertaining to factual and rule-abiding; (4) the time-curve of social media adop-

tion, varying between early and fast implementation and late and slow; (5) whether the organization engages a select few or numerous social media users; and (6) if the organization implements control towards uniformity or high degree of employee discretion. The latter may still involve control, a form of ‘just be yourself’ management (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009).

Figure 1. Evaluative themes regarding social media use and humour that factor into organizational identity construction.

Positioning as both popular and controversial

The following two examples feature the chief of the Oslo police’s service centre. His narrative of the Oslo police’s use of humour presents a few predicaments: the first, to use humour but not too much, and the other, to use humour but not the wrong kind of humour. In his narrative which portrays a quest for ideal social media use and ideal police identity, the Oslo police are positioned as both popular and at times controversial:

Excerpt 1, IR = interviewer, IE = interviewee

- 1 IR fint ehm (2.0) har ni noen særskilt mål da med kommunikasjonen via sosiale
good ehm (2.0) do you have any particular aim with the communication in social
- 2 medier?
media?
- 3 IE nei altså hh målsettinga vår ehm er jo det her at vi skal få en tettere (.) kontakt
na well hh our aim ehm is of course that we shall get in closer (.) touch with the
- 4 med publikum og at ehm vi skal opprettholde den kontakten for at vi skal kunne
public and that ehm we shall maintain that contact
- 5 IR ja
yes
- 6 IE bruke den når ehm krisen er der (.) da må den være varm hele tiden >det er
so that we can make use of it when ehm a crisis strikes (.) then it has to be warm
- 7 liksom< målsetninga med den der små:praten eller de småopplysningene som
all the time >that's like the< aim with this sma:ll talk or the lesser information
- 8 e:gentlig ikke har noen betydning for publikum men det er for at vi holder
that re:ally doesn't matter for the public but it keeps the channel a little warm

- 9 kanalen litt varm også har jo vi brukt en del hu:mor da
 and we've used some hu:mor
- 10 IR umhm
 umhm
- 11 IE gjennom tidene for å liksom >det tok veldig av til å begynne med (.) vi fikk så
 over time to somehow >it really took off in the beginning (.) we got such good
- 12 gode tilbakemeldinger på at det var noen som prøvde å være veldig morsom<
 feedback that there were some who tried to be very funny<
- 13 IR umhm
 umhm
- 14 IE også hadde vi en sånn topp hvor det var veldig mye som var veldig sånn
 and we had like a peak where a lot was very like
- 15 IR okej umm
 okay umm
- 16 IE og det skaffet oss veldig mange følgere (.) vi ble jo litt sånn populær av det
 and it got us very many followers (.) we got a little like popular because of it
- 17 IR umm
 umm
- 18 IE men det har jeg jo måtte tatt ned da
 but I've had to take that down
- 19 IR umhm det har gått ned etter det?
 umhm it has gone down after that?
- 20 IE ja altså vi var nødt til å begynne å diskutere at det er ikke egentlig sånn altså vi
 yes well we had to start discussing that it's not really you know we should be no
- 21 skal ikke være noen humorkanal
 humour channel
- 22 IR nei
 no
- 23 IE vi kan godt skrive noen ting altså det skjer jo så mye rart (.) og at vi kan ha en
 we may well write a few things surely many funny things happen and we can
- 24 morsom tilnærming til det
 have a high spirited approach to it
- 25 IR umm
 umm
- 26 IE det synes jeg er greit (.) da- da er det in:teressant å følge oss da har vi- da har
 I think that's good (.) then- then it's interesting to follow us- then we have- then
- 27 vi en gruppe som hjelper oss når krisen er der
 we have a group that helps us when the crisis comes
- 28 IR ja
 yes
- 29 IE så det har liksom vært min sånn tilnærming til det (.) men det skal ikke være
 so that has sort of been my approach to it (.) but it shouldn't be like there is
- 30 sånn at her skal det ligge noe kjempeartig hver helg for eksempel
 something really funny here every weekend for example. (Respondent 11, Oslo Police District)

Asked about the aim of the communication in social media, he replies that the goal is to 'get in closer (.) touch with the public', conveying metaphorically an ongo-

ing social interaction and exchange. To meet this goal, he asserts that their communication channel has to be ‘warm all the time’, associating metaphorically their use of social media with the regularity and persistence of a machine. The police are positioned as having to be responsive to the needs of social media audiences because then they can reach a mass crowd when a serious situation occurs (lines 6 and 27). In turn, these audiences are positioned as motivated to following the police in social media if there are continuous updates (lines 6–8) and entertaining updates (lines 11–16, 24–27).

The interviewee does much to advocate the police’s use of humour, using intensifying and more metaphorical discourse (‘It *really took off*’, ‘we had *such a peak*’). But he also announces that the undertaking was not entirely successful. Reportedly, some ‘*tried to be very funny*’, and as everyone knows, the best comedy seems effortless not laboured (Roedckelein, 2002: 68), and trying implies the possibility of failing. Then there is the counter (‘*but I’ve had to take that down*’), where the Oslo police’s use of humour on Twitter is construed as an object that he can control. He also presents an ethical obligation (‘we should be no humour channel’), disaligning with replete humorous tweeting, enacting managerial control and evoking the first and sixth themes in Figure 1. He positions himself as diverting the police away from a path leading to non-serious identity effects, into a path of using humour in social media occasionally and carefully, maintaining a serious enough identity.

The interviewee then continues to insist on the value of a moderate use of humour (‘we may’, ‘surely there are’, ‘we can’, ‘that’s okay’). Yet all the insisting on the value of humour implies the presence of resistance (Martin and White, 2005), that there are opposing views against which he directs all his pronouncements. The interviewer may convey some scepticism, but the interviewee’s pronouncements are likely also directed towards actors in the wider context of the community and police organization.

This next example, also featuring the chief of the Oslo police’s emergency service centre, is a direct continuation of the previous one. We become involved in his endeavour to maintain on their Twitter account a reasonable sense of humour and police identity:

Excerpt 2

- 1 IE og det skal jo (.) vi har jo noen sånne regler på at det ikke skal gå på andres
and it’s supposed to (.) we have a type of rules that it should never be at the
- 2 bekostning selvfølgelig
expense of others of course
- 3 IR umm
umm
- 4 IE vi kan være.hh vi kan få lov til å gjøre nesten hva som helst hvis vi skriver noe
we may be.hh we may be allowed to do almost anything if we write something
- 5 som er morsomt om oss selv (.) være litt sånn sarkastisk ovenfor politet (.) det er
funny about ourselves (.) be a bit like sarcastic towards the police (.) that’s good
- 6 greit.hh men ikke noen andre og spesielt med dette med med etnisitet og
.hh but not anyone else and especially with this with ethnicity and religious-
- 7 religiøs- religion og sånne ting

- religion and stuff like that*
- 8 IR umm
umm
- 9 IE det skal vi- der har vi hatt noen bommerter da som det
we shall- where we have had some slip-ups that we
- 10 IR noen bommert hva innebærer det?
some slip-ups what does that mean?
- 11 IE vi skrev for eksempel ehm vi hadde en t- hh tweet som var mo- den ble jo veldig
we wrote for example ehm we had a t- hh tweet that was fu- it became very like
- 12 sånn populær men altså
popular but really
- 13 IR umm
umm
- 14 IE det var en som- det var et brudedefølge hvor den ene bilen fikk motorstopp og hanit
was- it was a wedding procession in which one car got engine failure and he-
- 15 bilen stoppa og han la ut et bønneteppe og begynte å be
the car stopped and he let out a prayer rug and began to pray
- 17 IR okei
okay
- 18 IE midt på motorveien
mid highway
- 19 IR ja
yes
- 20 IE alltså:: også sto det sånn ‘og akkurat som om det hjelper’ sto det liksom og den
we::ll and it read like ‘and just as if it helps’ it said and it was a bit like it was
- 21 var litt sånn den ble jo: retvitra veldig mye men sant da- da beveger vi oss på en
retweeted a lot but really then- then we move on such a knife’s edge in terms of
- 22 sånn knivsegg i forhold til hva som kan bli akseptert av folk
what can be accepted by people
- 23 IR umm ja
umm yes
- 24 IE og hvis det er jo ikke meninga (.) vi skal jo ikke lage noen konflikter ut av det
and it’s not the point (.) we should definitely not create any conflicts out of it.
(Respondent 11, Oslo Police District)

There is much to note in this excerpt. The respondent positions the police as able to cater to the public with entertaining social media content (lines 5–6, 12) but as having to exercise this discretion within the limits of appropriateness (lines 1–2, 6–7). He disaligns with the humour that is used at the expense of others outside the police force, where ‘supposed to’, ‘rules’ and ‘it should never’ establish that there are boundaries on preferred and permissible humour. The added proclaimer ‘or course’ acknowledges an audience that shares his position. He adds focus (‘especially’) on particular circumstances that are also grounds for discrimination (lines 6–7).

Second, there is the story, deliberately provoked by the interviewer, about a ‘slip-up’. A Muslim immigrant is positioned as acting irrationally, affording an opportunity for ridicule of which the police made full use. The story about the tweet produces humour through incongruity because praying for a car, instead of going about the problem mechanically, runs counter-expectation in a secular majority culture. The fact that the praying takes place ‘mid highway’ consists of more rhetoric of counter-expectation – there is no Scandinavian road safety mindset! Moreover, the reported tweet presents two opposing positions regarding praying. The latter clause (‘it helps’) acknowledges that

there are people who think praying helps, but the first phrase ('just as if') constructs a counter-factual situation. The story of this tweet and its humour is countered with force ('but really'), through an ethical obligation ('We shall surely not'), and the positioning of a third group as being critical of the tweet (line 22). Again, the police are positioned as having to operate in social media within the limits of appropriate-ness, evoking the second and sixth theme in Figure 1.

Finally, the narrative is heteroglossic, or multi-voiced. Although this kind of humour is rejected by the interviewee, he says that the tweet was popular (line 12). The statement infers the position of a fourth group that was entertained by the tweet, indicating that the police were not all that wrong, or at least not alone in being wrong. The respondent also seems to start saying that the tweet was funny, but he self-repairs and avoids responsibility for any positive evaluation of it (line 11). The excerpt reveals a variety of viewpoints on the tweet and wider societal tensions over issues of ethnicity and culture.

Positioning as on the offensive and (more or less) in control

As shown in the next examples, being present in social media signals a desirable identity, and the earlier you have gone online, the better. Humour is also touched upon. The first example (excerpt 3) features the communications director of the Norwegian Police Security Service:

Excerpt 3

- 1 IE også veldig tidlig ute på Twitter (.) men vi var ikke Norges første offentlige etat
also on Twitter very early on (.) but we were not the first Norwegian government
- 2 på Twitter men eee jeg tror nok vi var en av de aller aller første sikkerhetsagency
on Twitter but ehm I think we were one of the very very first security
- 3 tjenstene i verden også på Twitter
services in the world on Twitter
- 4 IR ja SÄPO ((the Swedish security service))
yes SÄPO
- 5 IE ja SÄPO
yes SÄPO
- 6 IR [gikk vel ut nu nyligen]
[went on now recently right]
- 7 IE [ønsket vi velkommen nå] en fantastisk første tweet må jeg si den var veldig bra
[we bid them welcome now] a fantastic first tweet I must say it was very good
- 8 IR umm
umm
- 9 IE vi ønsket jo CIA velkommen på Twitter i sommer ehm <CIA sendte ut en tweet
we greeted the CIA welcome to Twitter this summer ehm <CIA sent out a tweet
- 10 hvor de skrev ee (1.0) ja at de we can neither confirm nor deny that we are on
where they wrote eh (1.0) yes that "we can neither confirm nor deny that we are
- 11 on Twitter or someth-
Twitter or someth-

- 12 IR umm hh
umm hh
- 13 IE e::: no noe i den retningen> hvor vi tok en reply på den hvor vi skrev ee
ee something of that sort> where we gave a reply to that where we wrote
- 14 'welcome to Twitter CIA better late than never' (.) ehm og den fikk jo veldig stor
'welcome to Twitter CIA better late than never' (.) ehm and it really got great
- 15 oppmerksomhet da
attention
- 16 IR umm
umm
- 17 IE det var også en litt sånn >morsom tweet<
it was also a bit like a >funny tweet
- 18 IR umm
umm
- 19 IE >så på Twitter eller sosiale medier kan man være uformell (.) man kan være litt
so on Twitter or social media you can be informal (.) you may be a bit more<
- 20 mer< (1.0) e::h ha en s:nert av humor men man skal være veldig varsom med
(1.0) ehm have a l:ash of humour but you should be very cautious about how you
- 21 hvordan man (.) hvordan man-
(.) how you-
- 22 IR uttrykker seg?
express yourself?
- 23 IE ja:
ye:s
- 24 IR eller?
or?
- 25 IE ja
yes. (Respondent 1, Norwegian Police Security Service)

First the communications director positions a collective 'we' as being an early adopter – his organization was one of the first security services in the world on Twitter (lines 1–3). He further recounts that they have welcomed others to Twitter, the renowned CIA and the Swedish SÄPO (lines 6 and 8). This presentation of knowledge and valuation of who went online when creates a competitive situation. The own organization is positioned as having been forward-looking vis-a-vis less updated and less contemporary security services. The fourth theme in Figure 1 is used for both positive self-positioning and humorous effect.

Second, there is some positioning of security services as being entertaining and successful in social media. He offers positive judgement of the Swedes' first tweet – which read 'For security's sake we are now on Twitter. Follow us, because we're following you' – which ironizes police surveillance. He also recounts how they responded to the CIA, causing his own organization to appear witty and confident with the world-renowned CIA on the receiving end of the fun. Positive judgement is provided ('it got great attention'), implicating the position of an audience that pays attention to entertaining content. The interviewer's discreet response (line 15), however, justifies the communications manager spelling out that their tweet was funny (line 16), although ideally humour needs no explanation.

Third, there are pronouncements of the viability of informality and humour on Twitter and social media, corresponding with several themes in Figure 1. It is implied on the flipside that in other forms of inter-organizational communication such a language style is not expected. There is also a counter (line 19) emphasizing that there are boundaries on preferred and permissible humour in social media. These generali-

zations are created by a shift from the 'we' pronoun used previously to the generalizing 'you' (Scheibman, 2007) and to advice-giving patterns ('you can', 'you may', 'you should').

Overall, it is notable that competitive discourse including a witty tweet about the CIA is drawn upon as a resource to construct an organizational identity that signals strength. Similar to other male-dominated businesses, participants compete 'to out-do each other and "top" a previous witty comment' (Holmes and Schnurr, 2005: 136). The account of the organization as both an early adopter and a witty competitor adds to the positioning of them as 'on the offensive', a military metaphor used for self-positioning at other instances by the interviewee.

In this next example (excerpt 4), there is also emphasis placed on the importance of being present in social media. The communications manager for the Norwegian Police Directorate positions the police districts as free to model their communication in social media and whether they should use humour or not. But this narrative coexists with ideals of organizational control:

Excerpt 4

- 1 IR ja politiet er vel kjent for å ha (1.0) umm en kommunikasjon ved sosiale medier
yes the police are well known to have (1.0) umm communication through social
2 som gir ett bilde av hverdagen så der?
media that gives a picture of daily life sort of?
3 IE jo altså når det gjelder Twitter som- som er det vi er mest kjent for (.) så er det
well regarding Twitter which- which is what we're most known for (.) it's Ann
4 Ann Margrethe her som du skal treffe etterpå som er i kontakt og har en slags (.)
Margrethe here who you will meet next who is in contact and has a kind of (.)
5 ehm kontroll og oversikt med hvordan vi bruker Twitter >vi har retningslinjer for
ehm control and overview of how we use Twitter >we have guidelines for Twitter
6 Twitter-bruk vi har det for Facebook og sosiale medier også (.) mer eller mindre
(.) more or less well understood and established< but (.) now there i:::s I'm not
7 godt forstått og forankret< men (.) nå er de::t jeg er nok så sikkert på- det kan
entirely sure you can get it confirmed afterwards that there is only one police
8 du få bekreftet etterpå at det bare er ett politidistrikt som ikke er på Twitter
district that isn't on Twitter
9 IR umhm
umhm
10 IE og det er Sogn og Fjordane ((et kystdistrikt)) o:::g Ann Margrethe skal faktisk på
and it's Sogn and Fjordane ((a coastal district)) a:::nd Ann Margrethe shall
11 fredag reise til Sogn og Fjordane for å gi dem en dags opplæring
actually go on Friday to Sogn and Fjordane to give them a day's training
12 IR okei
okay
13 IE så: vi har tro på at i løpet av kort tid nå så er alle landets politidistrikt på Twitter
s:::o we have faith that shortly all the country's police districts are on Twitter
14 IR umhm
umhm
15 IE og det er jo operasjonssentralene i hovedsak som er på Twitter (.) og det er
and there are mainly emergency centres on Twitter (.) and that's why you get
16 derfor du får mange tweets og mange god og mang- eller hva skal jeg si god
many tweets and many good or man- what should I say a good everyday
17 hverdagsoversikt over >politiets håndtering av store og små saker<
overview of the >police's handling of large and small matters<
18 IR umm

- umm
- 19 IE men det varierer jo fra distrikt til distrikt og fra:: fra operasjonsleder til
but it varies from district to district and from::m from emergency centre manager
- 20 operasjonsleder hvor my:e tweets hvordan de se:r ut er det hu:mor eller ikke (.)
to emergency centre manager how ma:ny tweets how they loo:k if there's
- 21 alt dette baler vi jo med hvordan skal liksom dette systematiseres og
hu:mour or not (.) we're juggling with all of this how it should be systematized
- 22 standardiseres
and standardized. (Respondent 5, National Police Directorate)

The police directorate's communications director clarifies that it is their tweets they are most known for (line 3) and that emergency centres do most twittering, which implies that those who communicate are closely in touch with police work on the streets (lines 15–17). The use of humour is not presented as a unified social media strategy for the police organization. Instead, the districts are given discretion to choose how much and in what ways they communicate on Twitter (lines 19–20), implying varying identity effects.

The mode of expression in the interviewee's narrative is heteroglossic in that two viewpoints co-exist: on the one hand the ideal to have managerial control over the organization's social media use and on the other hand the reported lack of control. Lexical choices like systematization and standardization (lines 21–22) signal an ideal of managerial control. Moreover, in lines 3 and 4 she attributes to her colleague the function of maintaining contact with, and control and overview of, the police's Twitter activity. However, when deflecting responsibility to her colleague she is softening the proposition ('a *kind of* (.) ehm control and overview'), pointing to some degree of tentativeness or uncertainty. This positioning of her colleague as having marginal control (and herself as having even less) is countered through a fast-paced affirmation that they have guidelines for the use of social media (lines 5–6). But again, softening terms are added (line 6), indicating reserve towards the impact of the rules. Several turns thus evoke the theme of organizational control vis-a-vis employee discretion (see Figure 1). While the police organization is positioned as allowing some employee discretion, the reported ineffectiveness of social media rules implicates the position of some police officers as unreachable, disengaged or disobeying instructions.

The example also provides evidence of the fifth theme in the model, regarding the number of social media users. The turns regarding the expansion of Twitter-use in all police districts help position the organization as modern and up-to-date. The interviewee offers positive assessment of the expansion of Twitter-use through adverbials and emphasis ('there is *only* one police district that isn't on Twitter'), when affirming the upcoming social media training-day ('Ann Margrethe shall *actually* go'), and by expressing desire using an evaluative verb ('we have *faith* that in a short period of time'). She thus constructs a counter-expectational situation, positioning the police as making more positive progress with social media than could be expected.

Positioning as tough, fun *and* serious

In these next two examples, humour is drawn upon as a resource that adds dynamism to organizational identities. However, in the first example (excerpt 5) a communications officer at the Norwegian Health Directorate disaligns somewhat from informal communication and humour as it is represented as so unexpectedly popular:

Excerpt 5

- 1 IR har det vært noen annen hendelse som du kan huske under din tid her?
has there been any other event you can remember during your time here?
- 2 IE vi får mye større engasjement på (.) ja det er stadig o:verraskende hvor mye
we get a lot more attention for (.) well it's constantly surprising how much
- 3 engasjement det er på ting vi ikke tror skal engasjere mens de viktige tingene
engagement there is in things we think shouldn't be engaging while the important
- 4 bare går inn
things are just accepted
- 5 IR umm er det noe særskilt du tenker på da?
umm is there anything special you think of then?
- 6 IE ehm (1.0) vi har jo hatt- vi kjørte en sånn alkoholkampanje nå i høst
ehm (1.0) we've had- we did one of those alcohol campaigns this fall
- 7 IR umm
umm
- 8 IE <ehm med fokus på at bartenderere skal vise deg ut av puben hvis du er for full
<ehm with a focus that bartenders should show you out of the pub if you're
- 9 og at ehm (.) ja ehm 'hva er det du kaller det å være full?'
too drunk and that ehm (.) well ehm 'what do you call being drunk?'
- 10 IR umm
umm
- 11 IE ehm altså >'vi kaller det åpenbart påvirket men hva kaller du det?'< og det var
ehm well > 'we call it obviously under influence but what do you call it?' < and
- 12 jo enormt engasjement ehh masse delinger masse kommentarer eh ja (.) og mye
there was enormous interest ehh mass sharing mass comments eh well (.) and a
- 13 sånn som skapte med en gang egentlig mer enn vi trodde der da og også blant (.)
lot of it was created immediately actually more than we would have thought then
- 14 faktisk blant helsepersonel
and even among (.) actually among health personnel
- 15 IR umm
umm
- 16 IE så ja så:: det var litt sånn der var vi litt tøff- det var sånn type tema hvor vi var
so well so:: yes it was a bit like we were tough- it was the type of theme where
- 17 litt tøffere da
we were a little tougher. (Respondent 4, Norwegian Health Directorate)

This communications officer describes a campaign that uses humour through incongruity because, reportedly, a public authority addresses the people using the people's language: 'what do you call it to be drunk?' They furthermore declare that they call it 'obviously under influence', using their own professional lexis. Corresponding with the third theme in Figure 1, they play with different levels of discourse formality. The question is also an appeal to people to go online and contribute to an interactive word cloud that was part of the campaign, which adds to the organiza-

tion's folksy approach. As mentioned, the respondent disaligns from this type of humorous communication. It does not belong to the category of 'important' messages, and social media audiences are positioned as surprisingly entertained by a campaign (lines 2–4) that would hold little interest for the communications professionals themselves (i.e. 'things we think shouldn't be engaging'). The indicators of counter-expectancy are many: 'it's *constantly* surprising how', '*actually* more than we', '*even* among', '*actually* among'. Moreover, intensifying emphasis on certain words marks just how unexpected the engaged reaction was (e.g. line 12).

Finally, the interviewee indicates that this playful campaign made the organization appear tougher (lines 16–17). But her own numerous expressions of surprise at its popularity indicate a more sophisticated taste and alignment with more serious risk communication and identity effects. In contrast to the example of the police (excerpts 1–2), the organization is not positioned as needing to cater to entertainment-seeking audiences.

This next example features the communications director of the Norwegian National Security Authority (NSM), and it followed right after a few turns that concerned the organization's objectives for communication in social media. The interviewer asks how a tweet of theirs, where they offered a palm tree as a give-away, should be understood in this context. The following exchange transpired:

Excerpt 6

- 1 IR det her eksemplet med- med palmen som gas bort
this example of- of the palm tree that was given away
- 2 IE palmen ja
the palm tree yes
- 3 IR ja
yes
- 4 IE det var ikke en del av (.) det var ikke det tredje punktet på intensjonslisten
it was not part of (.) it was not the third point on the intent list
- 5 IR ja hh
yes hh
- 6 IE hh det var Fredriks ide det har han sikkert sagt
it was Fredrik's idea he probably told you
- 7 IR ja
yes
- 8 IE det var en veldig stygg palme forøvrig
it was a very ugly palm by the way
- 9 IR jaha hh
alright hh
- 10 IE (stille latter)
(quiet laughter)
- 11 IR men men passer den inn i noen av de her kategoriene eller finnes det *but*
but does it fit into any of the categories here or is it-
- 12 IE nei den passer ikke inn i noen av kategoriene
no it doesn't fit into any of the categories
- 13 IR nei
no
- 14 IE den passer inn men den (.) den kan passe inn i den forstand at NSM er et
it fits into but it (.) it can fit in the sense that NSM is a directorate (.) we are

- 15 direktorat (.) vi er et alvorlig direktorat altså vi snakker om dataangrep vi
 a serious directorate in that we talk about computer attacks we talk about
 16 snakker om sikring og trygghet altså vi har det jo veldig moro her på dette
 security and safety really we have a lot of fun here in this office but our mission
 17 kontoret men det er på en måte mye alvor i vårt oppdrag hvis du skjønner
 is in a way very serious if you realize
 18 IR umm
 umm
 19 IE e:hm og derfor så er det så spennende og meningsfullt også men palmen bidrar jo
 e:hm and therefore it's so exciting and meaningful as well but the palm helps to
 20 til å si til hvertfall vise at vi har litt humor
 to say to at least show that we have some humour
 21 IR umm hh
 umm hh
 22 IE om ikke annet så at Fredrik har humor (latter)
 if only that Fredrik has humour (laughter)
 23 IR umm
 umm
 24 IE i NSM også da og det bidrar jo til å gi et litt sånn litt annen valør at liksom vi kan
 at NSM also then and it helps to give a bit a somewhat other denomination that
 25 ha og spille på det så det var jo gøyalt at det fikk så bredt nedslagsfelt
 we can have and can play on so it was really fun that it had such a broad reach.
 (Respondent 7, NSM)

First, this narrative which is initiated by the interviewer features an example of socialmediated humour. Evoking the third theme in Figure 1, the low level of discourse formality produces humour through incongruity. NSM's palm tree give-away is an unexpected move because bureaucratic organizations are assumed to replace their office interiors discretely, through formal agreements, contractors and cleaning companies. They are not expected to engage in activities that remind you of second-hand markets and private dealings.

Following up on the communication director's talk about communication strategies, the interviewer proposes that the tweet about the palm tree could be related somehow. The communications director counters by denying twice, the first time humorously by ruling out a made-up alternative that this tweet would be one of three communication goals (line 4), and then when the interviewer presses on regarding its possible strategic value, she denies again (line 12). Thereafter, she starts considering the meaning of humorous tweets as part of their communication, and simultaneously organizational identity becomes a matter for definition (lines 14–17). She draws upon the binary opposition, seriousness and humour, where seriousness is considered the core of the directorate, which is positively judged right after (19), whereas the tweet about the palm tree is placed as evidence of humour. It also serves to display a genuine identity because, indeed, they do have fun at the office (line 16). So, humour is drawn upon as a discursive strategy that positions the directorate as versatile and fun, and not dull or stuffy. In the last turn, she mentions the broad reach of the tweet, which infers the position of a social media audience that pays attention to you if you provide entertaining content. It also functions as a final positive judgement.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored communication professionals' positionings in relation to the use of humour in social media and how these positionings project organizational identities that are relevant to them. I will now sum up how these positionings can be usefully understood along the six evaluative themes presented in Figure 1.

A first theme that some interviewees relate to is how frequently an organization uses humour in social media. The positionings of interviewees along this dimension implicated that some use of humour in social media enables their organizations to pursue a versatile identity and not just present themselves as traditionally bureaucratic authorities, but also as fun and tough. Some use of humour in social media also seems to enable interviewees to reclaim a more authentic organizational identity and self (cf. Westwood and Johnston, 2012). A corresponding social position is that of an entertainment-seeking crowd. Ultimately, these identity positions refashion the traditional citizen–institution relationship towards one foregrounding consumer needs and entrepreneurial responsiveness (cf. Du Gay, 2000). However, if an organization had been using humour frequently, which was reportedly the case with the Oslo police, it was positioned as having gone beyond its distinctive identity and judged as no longer 'acting in character' (cf. Czarniawska, 1997). Because humour always contains personal valuation, too much of it conflicts with a bureaucratic ethos that requires personal opinions be kept aside in favour of professional impartiality.

A second evaluative theme concerns what type of humour the organization uses in social media. The interviewees report uses of humour which may be characterized on a dimension ranging from innocent to bold. In particular, positionings of the representatives of the police and security services included assertions of permission to use humour, but also assertions of obligation to avoid offensive humour. Indeed, throughout Western history, humour has had the capacity to cause offence in the areas of 'morality, etiquette or the heavens' (Billig, 2005: 47). One narrative about a tweet from the Oslo police that included ethnic ridicule showed that the brash humour of certain male-dominated workplace cultures (Collinson, 1988; Holmes and Schnurr, 2005) is made visible publicly through social media. Thus, the communication of some employees goes through a technologization process which makes it highly visible and watched over.

The third evaluative theme, regarding levels of discourse formality, was evidenced in the material in that discourse with an unexpectedly low level of formality produced humorous effects. Both the Health Directorate's campaign 'what do you call it being drunk?' and NSM's tweet offering a palm tree as a give-away on a first come, first served basis differ from conventions of bureaucratic language use and routines and were reportedly very popular. As has been repeatedly shown in this study, the reported popularity of humorous posts infers the position of a social media audience that pays attention to you if you provide entertaining content.

Moreover, evaluations of social media adoption and the number of social media users an organization engaged factored into organizational identity construction. Being an early adopter represented an opportunity for positive self-positioning, while positioning others as late adopters of social media equated ridiculing them. The re-

spondents of the Police Directorate prided themselves that all but one of the districts were on Twitter. This growing amount of communicators allows multiple interactions in social media, with potentially multiple voices and various organizational identity effects. So, rather than management controlling the organization's official communication directly (Rodrigues and Child, 2008), there is a movement towards decentralized communication maintained through policies, employee self-management and hierarchical intervention on failure.

This leads us to the sixth evaluative theme: To what extent and how does management attempt to implement control of the organization's social media presence? To different degrees, the interviewees report that their social media presence is tied to organizational goals and policies, and the use of humour is disciplined to be kept within the socially conventional. Social taboos that are common themes in humour (Billig, 2005) become regarded as off limits. But some narratives still suggest extensive employee discretion, similar to a 'be yourself' management approach (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009), involving trial and error and high-risk, high-reward identity effects. Particularly the police seem to enjoy a strong reputational confidence and enough popularity in the majority culture that they can allow for some experimentation and missteps in communicating in social media. Adding to previous research that mainly considers identity formation within the workplace (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Westwood and Johnston, 2013), the study shows that current negotiations of identity traverse traditional organizational spaces and involve organizational members positioning wider audiences as having opinions on employees' communication and as triggering either confidence or necessary measures.

Finally, it is central to consider some of the risks associated with authorities using humour in social media. Although it may feel rejuvenating with authorities who do not appear old-fashioned in their communication, one downside to the development is that public authorities create popularity around themselves on grounds other than their performance of primary duties. The border between relationship building and propaganda is subtle. Moreover, one reason to more clearly distinguish between professional and private identity is that an organization like the police is to serve and protect the people, and in this task they have more powers and responsibilities than ordinary citizens, and they therefore stand in a different relationship to citizens than citizens do among themselves. However, the use of humour in social media, and thus a form of personalized civil servanthip, produces changes in professional and organizational identity, and it thereby risks altering the institution-citizen relationship. This personalization of civil servanthip is difficult to reconcile with the nonpartisan bureaucratic ethos that actually legitimizes a public authority's superior power and responsibility (cf. Du Gay, 2000).

Some of the limitations of the present study, such as the moderate number of interviews conducted in a single national context, invite further studies with a broader scope. An avenue for future research would be to examine the management of multiple and versatile organizational identities, as some organizations use multiple social media and accounts foregrounding different characteristics and identities. Yet another

would be to examine actual, rather than reported, instances of humour in public organizations' use of social media.

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