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Spin doctors controlling political journalism

The stories you read in the newspaper about the proposed toll ring around Copenhagen, the Danish border control and private hospitals are to a wide extent controlled by the politicians' spin doctors. This is revealed in a new RU thesis describing how media stories are born.



Charlotte Boman Hede (left) and Trine Møller. Private photo.

By: **Camilla Buchardt, the Information Office**

Political journalists think of themselves as critical watchdogs who investigate, disclose and keep a rein on political rulers. The reality is, however, somewhat different according to a new master's thesis by Trine Møller and Charlotte Boman Hede, two journalism graduates from Roskilde University.

For example, it is common practice for journalists and spin doctors to have lunch together at Christiansborg and negotiate next day's newspaper headlines.

"Both groups have resources in which the other group has an interest. The spin doctor has the good stories; the journalist can attract attention to the spin doctor's politician on the media agenda. As a result, secret negotiations take place between the two groups," Trine Møller explains.

"As a reader, there is no way you can tell who the "author" is. The surprising factor is that neither the journalists nor the spin doctors see it as a democratic issue," she points out.

Instructing "independent" sources

According to the thesis, which is based on anonymised questionnaires and interviews

with political journalists and spin doctors, the Chinese walls between the "fourth power of the state" and the advisers to the politicians are far from solid.

The journalists' articles are in fact highly influenced by the agenda set by the spin doctors; even more so than the journalists realise. The journalists believe, for example, that as long as their stories are verified by independent sources, their objectivity has been ensured. However, the problem is that spin doctors may have talked to the relevant sources first.

One of the spin doctors interviewed by the two students informed them that when he "feeds" a story to a journalist, he also phones the sources likely to be contacted by the journalist, agreeing with them what their answers should be. He does this because he knows that the sources take an interest in agreeing with the spin doctor, who describes his relationship with the sources as follows:

"Typically, I will do it at the same time as I am selling the story. I will phone the player or players likely to be contacted by the journalist and inform the player that the journalist has a report and that he is likely to contact him. These players are always interested in being on good terms with the ministry."

About the survey

The thesis with the Danish title "Nyheder til forhandling – en undersøgelse af forholdet mellem politiske journalister og spindoktorer på Christiansborg" (News negotiated - a survey on the relationship between political journalists and spin doctors at Christiansborg) was written by Trine Møller and Charlotte Boman Hede, who have studied Journalism and Social Sciences and Journalism and Cultural Encounters, respectively, at Roskilde University.

On the basis of questionnaires completed by 93 journalists and 25 spin doctors as well as 12 qualitative interviews with journalists and spin doctors from ministries and political parties, Trine Møller and Charlotte Boman Hede have demonstrated how the work of journalists and spin doctors is intertwined and how the political advisers control many of the political stories in the media.

Only 5% of the spin doctors "strongly disagreed" with the statement "Journalists can take my words at face value".

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continued

The authors of the thesis believe that the view on journalists and their role in society should be reassessed:

“In our opinion, journalists should no longer be seen as objective watchdogs simply because it cannot be seen as objective to negotiate with sources which the political journalists do with the spin doctors,” says Trine Møller.

Visible source

What are the consequences for the individual reader when political journalism is in part controlled by Christiansborg?

“That readers don’t stand an honest chance of determining how to judge the stories they read in the media. If you take the sole view that the media are an objective watchdog, you will also believe that you can take the stories written by journalists at face value.”

Isn’t it only natural that a *quid pro quo* relationship should exist between journalists and spin doctors, who in fact are interdependent?

“Yes, it is natural. As more and more media have gradually surfaced along with news channels offering 24-hour coverage, the pressure on journalists has intensified. They must run faster than before, which unfortunately implies that they don’t have the time to dig out many of their stories themselves. They must, however, get their stories from somewhere, and who is closer to a politician than his spin doctor?” explains Trine Møller, who calls for the sources of the stories to be more visible to the reader:

“For example, one of the journalists we talked to informed us that he had just written a story based on a survey conducted by the Social Liberals. According to the journalist, they had strongly emphasised that the survey had been conducted by the Social Liberals, which would allow the reader to critically consider the results”, says Trine Møller, who believes that the “manipulative spin doctors” do not bear the sole responsibility for the somewhat muddled relationship between journalists and political rulers:

“Journalists are no pure angels. In reality, the journalists have a very harmonious relationship with the spin doctors.”

An accomplished lizard catcher

Tue Sørensen, Gardener at Roskilde University, knows how to arrange a pleasant day for himself: Pack the Land Rover with the kids, lunch boxes and fishing rods. Head for a sunny hillside. Then catch some lizards

Andreas Wraae, RUGlobal

Tue Sørensen slams his big fist down on the table between us, setting off a small tsunami in our bouncing coffee cups.

- Gotcha, you lizard, he exults.

Tue works as a gardener at Roskilde University. His spare time, however, is spent on activities such as catching lizards. He has just explained the method to this RUGlobal reporter. You have to be cunning, you see. In true Davy Crocket style, you sneak up on the tail-dropping crea-

ture and place a noose attached to the fishing rod around the reptile’s neck. And snap. You’ve got it. That is, without it dropping its tail, of

- Gotcha, you lizard

course. Tue and his kids can spend many hours doing this. Over the summer, they hatch the eggs and once the newly hatched lizards are big enough, they release them.

When this RUGlobal reporter meets Tue, it turns out that the lizard-catching hobby is



Tue Sørensen. In front of the gardener’s yard at Roskilde University. Photo: Sebastian Goos



Tue Sørensen, 35 years old. Employed as gardener at Roskilde University in March 2011. Lives in Tureby. Married with two children and one foster child. Photo: Sebastian Goos

only one of many interests of the RU gardener. If you were to describe Tue in four words, it would have to be family man, lad, nature

- I'd rather go moving some water in a kayak than sitting on a rowing machine

lover and lizard catcher. Oh yes, and he is in the habit of accompanying his punch-lines by slamming his bear's paw down on the table at varying force.

Moving water

Tue is not put off by hard work. And if he has to work up in a 30-metre tall tree, he won't ask for more. He loves cutting down trees in sections, which essentially means climbing a tree with a chainsaw, cutting off the branches on your way up to the top of the tree, and cutting the trunk in segments on your way down. This method is used if it isn't possible to down the tree in the usual manner; for instance if the tree is too close to a house, Tue explains.

- I have felled some really big trees down in Solrød Strand. Mid-morning, when you reached the top, you would secure yourself to the tree, bring out your lunch box and use the top of the trunk as a table, 30 metres in the air. If the weather was clear, you could see the Øresund Bridge and Barsebäck, Tue explains with a blissful smile.

- It's really invigorating, he says.

His wide chest and huge arms serve as evidence that he takes regular exercise. But never at a gym.

- I'd rather go moving some water in a kayak than sitting on a rowing machine. Once you get into the swing of it, and the only sound you hear is the water hitting the boat: "sjuf – tju, sjuf – tju", it's fantastic, he describes with a dreamy look. However, since he married and had children, the kayak trips have become less frequent at the expense of canoe trips. As he puts it: It's easier to "load" the family into a canoe than into a kayak.

The dream of Djursland

When it's time for real play, he fires up his Land Rover, an old 110-inch Defender, and goes off-roading with the other blokes at the Danish Land Rover Club. Actually, Tue's Land Rover took its maiden voyage far away from the tarmac and with another driver behind the wheel. Its previous owner used it to cross the African continent.

- It got a stone chip in its windshield between Tunis and Libya, just outside the Libyan border post, he explains.

- That's a cool story, I think, he says, patting the white four-wheeler appreciatively on its bonnet. However, the next time it will be used off road will be with Tue behind the wheel in Jyderup. They have some crazy hills, you see.

Even with his many irons in the fire, Tue still dreams of new projects. A farm in Djursland is just one of the dreams he hopes will come true one day. He and his family own about nineteen acres of land in Djursland with a small holiday

cottage. The cottage has no electricity or hot water.

- It means taking a bath in a casserole, he explains with his characteristic smile, which is not used sparingly. You sense that Tue likes to keep things simple. In future, he is hoping to exchange his holiday home for an old abandoned dairy that he has his eyes on in the area.

In the near future, however, the next dream to be pursued is to learn the art of fly-fishing. In fact, his teacher is also from Roskilde University, and he is the Danish fly-fishing champion.

- He can hit a coffee cup with his fly at a 28-metre distance, Tue says with one of his more powerful slams in the table. He is clearly impressed.

Trained at Roskilde University

Tue was hired as RU's new gardener in March this year. He actually trained as gardener here at RU back in the 1990s, and RU is therefore not in any way new to him. He is very happy with his job as a RU gardener. It gives him time with his family, which he needed after having been busy as an independent landscape gardener for several years.

- Basically, I believe that we work too much and spend too little time with our families, he says, and continues with a despairing slam on the table: - But that is after all how society is organised.

Tue, who is originally from Roskilde, has come to realise that family is what matters the most. He met his wife when he was 20 years old.

- And we have been together ever since, he says.

Two new family members have been added to the family over the years: a girl of nine and a boy of six. Tue and his wife are also foster parents for a sixteen-year old boy.

The articulated devil

You have probably seen Tue racing around RU on his yellow articulated tractor. During winter, it is used for snow clearing. The paths must be cleared by 8 a.m. Although this means getting up early, Tue is fine with this. You sense that the boy in him is looking forward to the snow clearing.

- I attach the shovel in front and the salt spreader at the back, and then you just need start shoveling, he says with a boyish laughter.

He does, however, have many other tasks to do before it is time for snow clearing. Next week, Tue will mainly be busy preparing for the annual party at Roskilde University. The gardener, the lad, the family man and the lizard catcher has his hands full.

International delegation Roskilde University

Problem-oriented group work and the social environment were at the top of the agenda when Susan Varmer from the International Office of Roskilde University helped introduce the university to visitors from various international universities. The occasion was the major EAIE Conference in Copenhagen, at which researchers and administrative staff from around the globe had gathered to share knowledge

Photo and text by Emil Ryttergaard, RUGlobal

High-profile guests from countries such as Japan, China, Australia and Switzerland had assembled in Copenhagen for the annual European Association of International Education Conference. As part of the conference, a group of delegates had been invited to Roskilde University to learn more about problem-oriented group work.

Following a welcoming speech by Pro-Rector Hanne Leth Andersen under the heading “Ros-

kilde University – The Attractive Alternative,” the visitors were given the opportunity to visit the basic studies houses, watch video recordings and learn about projects created by students. For many of the visitors, the meeting with Roskilde University was an academic eye-opener, but the delegates were also impressed with the social environment at campus.

Social environment

One of the visitors, Kazuhiro Kudo, Assistant Professor of Communication, Dokkyo University, Japan, was positively impressed with all

of the social activities taking place at campus, since many young people in Japan are troubled by a high degree of social isolationism, leading among other things to suicide and a difficult educational environment.

Kazuhiro Kudo was, however, not the only one to have travelled a long way to see Roskilde University and learn about the students’ experiences with problem-oriented project work. The delegation also included two representatives from the HEAD Foundation, a think tank in Singapore whose purpose it is to examine



The entire international delegation visiting Roskilde University in connection with the EAIE Conference in Copenhagen.

visiting

whether it would be beneficial for Singapore to adopt the teaching methods of other universities. Among other initiatives, the think tank is in the process of identifying which universities in Europe use problem-oriented group work, in which Susan Varmer takes a special interest.

»What is interesting to Roskilde University in that context is that it might give us an opportunity to get in touch with other universities using problem-oriented group work,« Susan Varmer explains.

The social environment attracted great attention from the HEAD Foundation and the other visitors of the delegation; not least because of the inter-relation between problem-oriented group work and the physical environment at campus.

»I saw several of the visitors come and ask questions about the houses and whether the students also lived in the houses, and they generally found it interesting to learn that the framework actually supports what we are saying,« says Susan Varmer.

A certain degree of criticism was, however, also detected among the visitors, and Susan Varmer explained that some of the visitors had pressed the students a bit, asking them if everything was really as rosy as it seemed.

Openness and honesty

Susan believes that the honesty and direct approach shown by the visitors are important to

Roskilde University when presenting the university to new or existing exchange partners.

»The key factor is to give them an idea of what Roskilde University is and what it does. It is then up to them to decide whether they like it or not. We are honest when we explain that it is a demanding study form, but that it is also rewarding for the students. This is what we wanted to pinpoint: that universities will know that this is where they send their students; also when they need to transfer credits for a 15 ECTS-point project, as their own study programmes may not necessarily offer such activity.«

Susan also stresses that all of the visitors of the delegation had been very pleased with their visit and had felt that they had received a warm welcome at Roskilde University, and that it had also given Roskilde University an opportunity to look inwards:

»This is interesting partly because it gives Roskilde University an opportunity to demonstrate our strengths to the world and to ourselves. It is also an internal learning process: what impression do we give international representatives when they visit us? It was great for us to be seen through other people's eyes.«

The EAIE Conference was held from 12 to 16 September at the Copenhagen Business School and the Bella Center in Copenhagen. Roskilde University was represented at this year's conference along with other Danish universities.

Ved vurdering af ansøgere til medlemskab af forskningsrådet vil der blive lagt vægt på ansøgers videnskabelige kvalifikationer, såvel praktiske som administrative.

Motiverede ansøgningsmateriale med bilagt curriculum vitae bedes indsendt til Gigtforeningens forskningsråd, Gentoftevej 118, 2820 Gentofte eller forskning@gigtforeningen.dk senest tirsdag den 15. november 2011.

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