Why is it that speeches written by diplomats always sound the same and never bring any new insights? In many books and articles written by international historians and international relations (IR) specialists, the unspoken assumption is that this is due to the need for clear signaling. Diplomats’ speeches are important instantiations of a state’s foreign policy line, and so the rational thing to do is to signal clearly and consistently. Drawing on my own experience as a listener to, reader of, and particularly writer of diplomatic speeches, I want to question this often-implicit assumption. I treat speeches as a practice (cf. Neumann 2002), and demonstrate that the practice is set up within a Foreign Ministry as a fairly closed one. The ostensible target of the speech, its audience, plays the role of implied listener in a very limited degree. Rather, as seen from each specific part of the Foreign Ministry, the speech is a place to demonstrate the muscle of that part by flagging the importance of its area of responsibility. Each speech is an identity-building project, with the resulting text serving as an instantiation of the Ministry itself.

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The number of books and ephemera by academics who have served in political office or in an advisory capacity is huge. This literature is almost exclusively focused on the substantive experience of being involved in decision making, the “what” of politics. When comments are made on the “how” of politics, they usually pertain to politics as a power struggle, not as an institutionalized social practice. And when such comments are made, they come across as the odd reflection on the odd incident, not as a sustained effort in self-reflection. The text that come closest to performing such a task in the extant IR literature is Michael Barnett’s (1997) piece on how, as a temporary assignment to the UN delegation in the early 1990s, the UN system made him an instant Rwanda expert and part of an organizational culture where not interfering with the genocide going on in that state was represented as the prudent thing to do. Where Barnett’s analysis focuses on the socialization of the bureaucrat in order to explain inertia, however, I explain inertia by focusing on how the very process of producing text works. Both in substance and method, the closest parallel in the extant literature may be Ferguson’s (1990) ethnographical analysis of a much more composite phenomenon, namely how development projects keep on producing the same effects, despite the fact that most people involved know that the specified targets are not being fulfilled.

“The Asia Advisor has ordered a speech in connection with the royal couple’s visit to China. I thought this might be a good opportunity for you, Iver, to try your hand at speech writing.” We are at a morning meeting in the Planning and Evaluation Unit, an organ of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs subordinated directly to the secretary general and being in this regard an anomaly vis-à-vis the Ministry’s ten Departments (see Figure 1).

The secretary general is the senior civil servant in the Ministry, and only out-ranked by its politicians. As are the ten Departments, the Planning and Evaluation Unit is headed by a director general, and it is he who gives me a two-page order slip from the Ministry’s Asia Advisor. He and the other regional advisors are all former ambassadors; with only 11 director general positions and around a hundred foreign postings headed by people with the status of ambassador, the ranks hold more ambassadors than there are regular jobs at the ambassadorial level, and so positions like those of area advisors are filled by personnel with the grade of ambassador. I am also an advisor, employed for a year and a half, brought in, or so I was told, to “furnish a different perspective” and to be an intellectual jack-of-all-trades. As a social anthropologist, I also engage in participant observation.1 Speech writing seems to be an obvious task for the new advisor.

The speech turns out to be for the King, to be delivered in 20 minutes to a party of businessmen from Hong Kong gathered around a luncheon table by the Norwegian consulate general. Along with the order slip there is a half-page note from the Consulate in Hong Kong. It states that the Consulate was established in 1907, as one of the first after Norway left its personal union with Sweden in 1905; that Norway and Hong Kong have always had good business relations; that Hong Kong is mentioned in particular in the Foreign Ministry’s 2-year old Asia plan. There is also some advice on what the focus of the speech should be.

The Planning Unit’s number two is Assistant director general S. Ranveig, a fellow specialist in Russian and East European Affairs I knew well already before entering the Ministry. She has become my mentor. It so happened that she returned from a

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1This data-collecting technique has its own practical and ethical problems, which have been subject to a century of anthropological debates. The American Anthropological Association has drawn up a code of ethics, available at http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm. I found this code to be useful. A central issue concerns how one’s status is declared and handled during fieldwork. In my case, I accepted the job offer on the express condition that I would draw on my experiences for research purposes. This demand sparked no conditionality from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). I also kept my colleagues appraised about this on a regular basis. Observation was thus open, not hidden. Subsequent dissemination of results has not sparked controversy, despite the rather limited size and reclusive traits of the universe studied.
Fig. 1. The Norwegian Foreign Ministry, 1998

Source: Neumann, 1999
foreign posting to the second-highest position in the unit just as I joined it, and we have had ample opportunity to reestablish contact during the first weeks, when we shared an office. Ranveig says that above all I have been given the task of writing this speech in order to familiarize myself with the workings of the Ministry. She explains how I should proceed. I should “go and talk to” the various “in-house” sections in order to draw out their input. In this particular case, it is of the essence to “establish rapport with” the Office of Foreign Economic Affairs, she explains.

Why so? Because the office, and the department of which it is a part, are the closest thing in the regular organization grid directly responsible for the issue area concerned. Once I have “established rapport with” them—that is, once I have spoken to them, received their input, and established a feeling of consensus among us—I may proceed to write the speech and put it in the director general’s pigeonhole. He will then read it, perhaps annotate it, and then return it to me. I will subsequently correct it, send it to the Translation Section to be language washed, and then it will finally be signed off. Does that mean that I should send it to the archive? No, Ranveig explains, not entirely. I will deliver the finished speech to the Unit Secretary, who will then write a covering note and make three copies (an original, a blue copy for the general archive, and a yellow copy for the Unit’s manual archive). She will also, when necessary, make copies for the rest of the Unit. In any case she will put a copy of the end-product in my pigeonhole. Finally, it may also be wise for me to keep a copy of the processed text, and perhaps I should also make some copies for the colleagues who have contributed their input and for the Secretariat of the foreign minister.

“So I’ll find out who is the officer in charge of the case in the Office of Foreign Economic Affairs and send him or her an e-mail,” I say. Well, says Ranveig, it would be a good thing if “you went and spoke to the officer in charge.” The process, she seems to imply, should not be an anonymous one. Diplomats, it seemed, believe in the face-to-face. Of course I take her advice. I draw up an outline of the speech, print several copies, make additional copies of the order slip and the note from the Consulate in Hong Kong, check who is the officer in charge at Foreign Economic Affairs, call him to announce my arrival, and then walk the 300 m from the Northern Building in Victoria Terrace, home of the three main buildings of the Ministry, to the Southern Building, where the Foreign Economic Affairs Section is located (Figure 2).

I have a chat with the officer in charge. Norway and its political community is a tight-knit affair; I have never met the man before, but it soon turns out that a friend of mine was once his colleague. We chat. “When do you think you can send me the speech,” I say. “I think I can manage a little something for you in the mail by tomorrow,” he says. Two days later there is a brown pigeon post envelope in my pigeonhole, containing half a page of text and a floppy disk. I sit down to write the speech, print it out, pick it up, and head for the Unit Secretary. I have this speech here, I say, now what? “Send it up to Harald,” she says. director general Harald J.’s office is located next to the rest of the Unit’s offices, but his pigeonhole sits on top of a vertical stack of pigeonholes. Even in sections where the pigeonholes are organized horizontally, with the director general’s always to the far left, one “sends up” drafts to be read through. The “up” refers to social space, not necessarily to the physical world of offices of pigeonholes.

Harald knocks on my open door as he steps over the threshold, putting the speech on my desk. I scramble to my feet. “This is fine,” he says. “Just send it over to the Asia Advisor when it’s finished.” As it is the Secretary who takes care of the practicalities when the speech is to be signed off, I take his meaning to be that I should walk the 200 m over to the Middle Building and deliver the cover note, the speech, and the floppy disk to the Asia Advisor in person. We talk a little about

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2English usage, regular throughout Europe. Pigeonholes are personal snail mail in-boxes for regular as well as internal (or pigeon) post, physically placed next to the unit’s secretary.
something else, he leaves, and I have a look at the draft, which he has annotated with a red pen. The corrections are what I would have called stylistic: word sequence, a certain weakening of the first person singular, an adjustment of a formulation about the expected “HR” (human rights) situation after the transfer of Hong Kong to Beijing’s jurisdiction. I decide simply to implement the suggested corrections, finish the speech, store it on the Ministry’s central disk drive, and put the entire thing in the pigeon mail (this time I don’t need to make a printout, because the Secretary and I are among the younger generation in the Ministry, who use its new intranet). The following day it is back in my pigeonhole all completed, I call the Asia Advisor and announce my arrival, and then I walk the 150 corridor-meters over to the Middle Building and up to the attic where the Division of which he is a part is located. We talk a little about the possibility of a war between Taiwan and China and the consolidation of the regime after the generation shift in the Beijing leadership. He is going to accompany the royal couple, so I wish him a good trip. He thanks me for the speech. The following day I get a Norwegian-speaking but definitely English voice on the phone; she is calling from the Translation Section (which is situated in another part of town, which is to say that it is impractical for her to walk over and talk to me in person). No stylistic objections, she says, but there is an ambivalent point on page five. We resolve it, and the conversation comes to an end. We seem to have avoided doing anything wrong, which, as in sports like gymnastics and diving, seems to be the main thing.

Although I have been brought into the Ministry to be an all-rounder, the economic sphere is my Achilles heel as a political analyst, and one of the parts of the world I know least about is China. Seen in this light, the assignment seems to have been an odd one. I raise this in the canteen at lunch. At table with me is an old friend from university who is now a trusted civil servant, and a number of his Office colleague. They all chuckle, and one of them says “welcome to the Foreign Ministry, that’s how it is for all of us. Here in the Foreign Service our role model is that of the potato: we must be able to cover all needs and fit in with everything. You see, you have to be a generalist.” When on later occasions I mention to people from the Foreign Ministry, and also to foreign diplomats, that my first experience of speech
writing came in an area where my expertise was definitely at its weakest, they all react in a similar fashion. A few weeks later I come across a review of the speech in the Foreign Ministry’s daily press clippings, taken from a commercial magazine.

When I mention this at the morning meeting of the Planning Unit, however, I am surprised to find that no one is interested. Diplomats themselves spend much time as the audiences of the speeches of other Foreign Ministries and institutions, when they participate in various meetings, and in particular when they are posted abroad and their main task is to follow and report on the development of the politics of the host country. “The speeches were mostly of the Merry Christmas and Happy New Year type,” as it was put with an uncharacteristic lack of discretion in a report from a foreign posting. As a segment of an audience, diplomats are (at least) as irritated as others by lack of sensitivity to the audience. Like other professions, diplomats carry out their work with a view to what their colleagues will make of it, and so they write their speeches with other diplomats and their shared sense of stylistics in mind, as can be witnessed by outbursts such as this one. However, something more than this well-known case of goal displacement seemed to be at stake.

My suspicion that audience targeting was the clue was however confirmed a little later, when I attended a meeting between the Planning Unit and the Secretariat of the Foreign Ministry. Also in attendance was a political advisor. In this meeting, I suggested that the Foreign Ministry ought to make a greater effort to identify the audiences of speeches and also of the Ministry’s other output. I argued that it was one of the Foreign Ministry’s main weaknesses that the various speeches were too similar, and that speeches in simple analytical terms did not differ significantly from other genres of writing the Ministry, such as notes and reports. I pointed out, somewhat self-righteously, that it was even common to submit take-outs from already written texts belonging to other genres when one was asked to make a contribution to, or a draft for, a speech. The political advisor, whose background was in journalism, supported me enthusiastically on this point, but no one from the civil service picked up the glove, the conversation took a different turn, and the topic was never raised again. The political advisor even caused a moment of embarrassment on the part of the members of the Foreign Ministry’s regular staff who were present when she referred to the fact that the other minister within the Ministry—the Minister of Development and Human Rights—had appointed a special speech writer and made him a part of the Secretariat. This was evidently a further development of a trend much disliked by both my colleagues in the Planning Unit and the civil servants in the Secretariat. Thus, other aspects of speech writing than information and audience targeting had to be more important to them, and it was no longer so obvious to me that this other aspect was turf battles.

Now I had become truly curious about what the underlying driving force of speech writing in the ministry really was. When a new opportunity to participate arose, I grabbed it with both hands. This time it was the Foreign Ministry’s main speech in a Norwegian context, the annual foreign policy account to Parliament. Principal Officer S. Hallgrim, in the Secretariat had given it to the Planning Unit, and the director general of the Planning Unit had delegated it to me. I suggested and had it accepted by both the Secretariat and my own unit that we should try to structure the speech around a uniting narrative, so that the speech itself would transmit a clear message. If things were done in this fashion, the ensuing speech would stand in stark contrast to previous speeches of this type. Having gone through the dossier where they were kept, I noted with confidence that they were undistinguishable from one another and from other types of text the Ministry produced, such as notes and white papers. Hence, with the aim of breaking this invariance, I set to work. I asked for input from the Offices, read the statement of

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3All ungraded “telegrammes” (faxes from foreign postings to the Ministry) were collected in folders and circulated in the Planning Unit.
purpose that had been put forth by the current governmental coalition upon their accession to power, as well as the previous speeches of the Ministry’s political leadership. I found that the two topics that kept recurring in the most recent documents were values and globalization. On this basis, I decided to structure the entire speech around the notion of “ethical globalization.” This would allow me to include most of the topics and ideas that the various sections had come up with, but in different forms that I could relate to the government’s main message about the importance of values and the insistence of the foreign minister that Norway maintain a high ethical profile in its foreign policy. I submitted the draft to the morning meeting in the Planning Unit, and proceeded to tone down and edit in response to criticism. Then I passed it on to S. Hallgrim, in the Secretariat.

Two weeks later the phone rang. Hallgrim told me that the foreign minister had brought the draft along on two trips, but that he had only had time to read it the preceding day. When he had reached page two and the introduction of the term “ethical globalization,” he had put the speech aside as being too analytical. The question was whether I could write a new draft more similar to previous speeches? I said I would discuss this with my director general. So I went and knocked on his door. “We had to expect this,” he said. “This is not how things have been done before.” “Alright,” I said, “but perhaps it would be wise if somebody else in the Unit completed the task, so that we are certain that we hit that ministerial slant.” So it went. The minister went to Parliament and made a speech similar to the accounts of previous years. The speech did not start a debate in the press or in the foreign policy milieu, and the country’s main broadsheet, Aftenposten, noted in an editorial that there was nothing new in the speech. I never heard this commented on in the Ministry, and when I cautiously tried to get people in the canteen to express an opinion on the comment in Aftenposten, it was shrugged off. The negative reception of the speech was simply not an interesting conversation topic. I had managed to confirm that analysis was unimportant in the Foreign Ministry system, that the audience’s reception was of little or no interest to the Ministry and that the established patterns were difficult to break, but I had learned little else.

It was difficult for me to deal with the ministry’s disavowal of analysis. When I let go of the annual account to parliament, and thus the possibility to learn more about how a speech gets a more ministerial slant, it was not least because I experienced this as equal to excluding the analytical aspect. I chose to let go of it because I already had another speech on the books. This time it was in fact myself who had taken the initiative, in the sense that I had established what the ancients called the kairos—the space, room, or format for the occasion. Relatively shortly after my entry into the Foreign Ministry, in a conversation about the relations between the Ministry and the rest of Norway, my director general had complained that the Ministry could only deliver policy speeches from a small number of podiums during the year: a couple of times in parliament, the annual speech to the Oslo Military Society, and that was that. I immediately saw an opportunity to take on the role of entrepreneur: When former foreign minister, defense minister, and director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) Johan Jørgen Holst passed away, NUPI, which happened to be my employer at the time, took the initiative to host a series of annual memorial speeches. The two first speeches had been given by Henry Kissinger and the world’s leading military historian, Sir Michael Howard. I suggested to my director general that considering Holst’s previous role as foreign minister, it would be entirely appropriate for the current foreign minister to be next in the series of prestigious speakers, and that the topic of the speech should be Norwegian security policy at large. My ulterior motive was that the task of writing the speech might end up on my table, and that I thereby might establish a new standard for speeches, where what was said was analytic, and where the speech came across as a clean narrative with the major theme being consistently on display.
I also thought it would be entertaining and personally satisfying to prepare such a memorial speech specifically for Holst, for whom a colleague and I had written a speech for a meeting of researchers and politicians on our future security when he was minister. The memorial speech was to be published in an academic journal delivered to an audience of researchers and international diplomats. This time, I thought, an analytical perspective must after all be inevitable?

My director general, who was also on the Board of NUPI, took note of the suggestion. After a couple of days he came into my office, asked me to probe the issue informally with the director of NUPI, and learn whether he might not like the foreign minister to hold the speech. I had expected this indirect approach, not only because of the diplomats' general bent toward indirect communication, but in particular because it is a principle in the Foreign Ministry that as much as possible of the cooperation with other actors should look like it is initiated by others, who thereby appear to be the demandeur, rather than the Foreign Ministry itself. The practice recurs in the layout of letters and overviews of co-hosts, in which the Foreign Ministry always puts itself at the top, regardless of actual roles in preparing events, alphabetical order, financing and other factors.

The director of the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs was positively inclined, and wrote a letter of invitation to the foreign minister. The Foreign Ministry Secretariat sent an order to the Planning Unit, and, as anticipated, the order landed on my desk. I wrote a draft of which the purpose was to display a number of contradictions in Norwegian security policy after the Cold War, trace the causes back to the uneven adaptation of various aspects of our defense and security policy to the new geo-political situation, and announce a few of moves that might reduce the tensions within the policy and make it seem more proactive. After a discussion in the Planning Unit, I once again sent a draft to the Secretariat.

This time I had a response within a few hours. The draft happened to end up in the hands of the Ministry’s assistant secretary general in charge of security policy. When he had finished reading, he had immediately walked over to Hallgrim S. in the Secretariat, and said that he had “almost had angina pectoris” from reading the draft. “Alright,” I said, “what happens now?” Hallgrim’s response to the ranking security officer had been to suggest a meeting in his office the following day, with some one from the Security Policy Section, himself, and me. The director general of the Department of Security Policy and a couple of his closest colleagues attended the meeting. It turned out that the department had two main objections to my draft. First, a lack of detailed information about developments in certain subareas, both their own and areas that were the responsibility of other sections of the Ministry. Secondly the direct language. In spite of having thought that I had learned that diplomats think of style as content and an indirect approach as a virtue, still my draft was too direct. I immediately conceded on this point, but as far as the details were concerned I decided to go for a confrontation. “Who needs that information in this context?” I asked, and pointed out that the audience would be coming in order to get an overview of the situation and the general drift of the plans. We needed an eagle’s view from above, and not a snake’s view from below. “No,” was the answer, it was not possible to give a speech on Norwegian security without mentioning the importance of the U.S. security guarantee, nuclear waste in the North, and so on. If such things were not mentioned, it would be a signal that they were not given priority.

Hence, the policy had to be repeated, if not it would be weakened. This is of course an entirely valid argument. It takes hard discursive work to keep things as they are (Garfinkel 1967). Making the world seem to be stable when it is in fact in constant flux, means that having power among other things involves having the ability to freeze meaning. It has to be done by constantly repeating specific representations of things, actions, and identities, until what one repeats is naturalized to such an extent that it appears doxic. One can only refrain from repeating representations if
they are already embedded in other representations that are repeated, so that they are confirmed indirectly. That was not the case on this occasion; hence I did not feel that I could argue against the need to repeat the policy in general. Instead I argued that it would be a closed forum for the informed, and that spending a lot of time on repeating the official line would be an ineffective way of spending resources. We should rather concentrate on saying something that would catch the interest of an audience consisting of academics and foreign diplomats, and I thought that would be something conceptual. This was rejected. It was not the “conceptual” but the “operational” that interested diplomats, and that should therefore be at the center.

This was also an unassailable argument. I was being made subject to diplomatic identity building, according to the formula that “you academics” concentrate on the conceptual while “we diplomats” concentrate on the operative. Thereafter the context of the speech was defined as being merely by incident and quite unconsequentially an academic arena; it was defined as being mainly a diplomatic arena. The space I had created for my innovative moves had thus effectively been erased. I said that I had written the speech on the basis of the idea that the conceptual would be the main thing in a speech to academics, but that the speech would obviously have to be written differently if it were written with a different function in mind. The director general leaned forward and said, “the draft is interesting enough, it is impressive that anyone would make an attempt at such a thing.” The meeting died away, and I was asked to coordinate the rest of the speech with the reason that Hallgrim would be far better placed for the task. The meeting was resolved, but Hallgrim started a conversation with me about something else, and when the two other participants had left, he said, smiling, “We might have avoided the risk of sick leave if we had polished the first draft a little.”

I headed down the corridor for my own office. So if Hallgrim and I had sat down and polished the text before it had reached the Assistant Secretary General, both the risk of angina pectoris and the need for clarifying meetings would have been lesser. What was most interesting was the way in which the conflict had been handled: as soon as it was clear that the result would be what the Assistant Secretary General had decided, consensus-building and the reestablishment of collegial harmony were the main objectives. Instead of going straight to my own office, I knocked on my mentor Ranveig’s door and told her the story, and also my own reflections on it. “Is it not this inclination towards consensus that eliminates the space for creativity and debate in the Ministry?” I asked. “Well, is it better up at Blindern [the main Oslo University campus], where people don’t speak to each other at all?” came the reply. No, I said, but in this case the result will be a less good speech. “It is important for every one to be in on it, so that we get a speech that the entire Ministry may stand for,” said Ranveig S.

At the following morning meeting I gave my account of the issue. The director general slumped back in his seat, and said that now the fate of another initiative taken by the Unit, in which we depended on the goodwill of the Department of Security Policy, was open to doubt. No more was said about the speech, but I had finally found an answer to my question about what this “other” was that makes audience reception subsidiary when speeches are written in the name of the Ministry. The fact that in this case it was the director general who emphasized how one turf battle might affect the next one, while it was the assistant director general who emphasized consensus, is in principle incidental. In no way was it due to a lack of awareness of the importance of turf battles on the part of the assistant director general. Only a few weeks before our conversation, she came to me to ask about something in connection with a speech she
herself was writing, and told me that “only an hour after Hallgrim had sent the draft to that Office they were at his door complaining, but he has become so accustomed to it that he simply ignores them.” The point is that by getting caught up in the importance of these turf battles, as I did when I wrote my first speeches, I missed all the other mechanisms that delimit how deep, comprehensive, and decisive diplomats let these turf battles become. The expectations inculcated by my training as a political scientist had simply blinded me to a lot of other things that were also going on.

When I had discovered this, I suddenly remembered how a diplomat friend once joked that he and his colleagues never fell out with one other, for it might well happen that they ended up as the only two Norwegian civil servants posted to Abidjan (most Norwegian posts have only two career diplomats). It struck me that there was no logical reason why this integrative and conflict-evasive way of organizing speech writing should only apply between diplomats who work in different Offices, but that it most likely also applies within each Office. That, after all, was the case in my own Unit. One way of finding out about whether this also held true for other parts of the Ministry would be to enquire about how the writing of the new parts of the Holst Memorial Speech were going in the Department of Security Policy. So the next time I saw somebody familiar in the Security Policy Section, I asked him how much time it had taken to write the speech, and who had done it. He estimated the Section’s work on the speech at about 22 hours: he himself had spent eight hours on it, X had written about one field and Y about another, Z had written a few bits and the director general had read through the entire draft twice. The section as such had thus followed the same model as the Ministry as a whole: everyone who was seen as having a claim to chime in had been invited to do so.

This mode of working takes its time. The next time I met Hallgrim S., I asked him to give an estimate of how long the Ministry as a whole had worked on the foreign minister’s speech. He put the efforts of his colleagues and himself at about 40 hours, the foreign minister’s at about 3, that of the entire Ministry at about 120 hours, “and in addition there are section meetings and canteen talk.” As far as the larger speeches are concerned, it is thus not only metaphorically that the entire Ministry stands behind them.4

Gaining a Voice

The fact that, during 15 years as a reader of politician’s speeches before my stint in the Foreign Ministry, I had not thought about the complexity of the genesis of speeches, speaks worlds about how isolated from the microphysics of power one in fact is as an academic, even when one is seemingly in constant interaction with practitioners. It also says a good deal about the advantage of participant observation as a form of data collection about social processes, and about the enormous advantages of researchers who have personal experience from the field they are researching. An incident in connection with the foreign minister’s delivery of the Holst Memorial Speech demonstrated this. Upon that occasion, a colleague who has been married to a top politician for many years came over and shook my hand with a grin and said “congratulations on your parts.” He obviously knew how speeches emerged, but due to his training as a political scientist he had probably never seen it as relevant to make his implicit knowledge explicit. Those who know a little about practical politics know that the foreign minister’s speeches seldom can be read as the result of a simple tug of war. They are also the result of a process in which different points of view and emphases are patched together in a manner that everyone can live with.

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4The speech was handed out in script form, with the usual “check against delivery” noted in the upper-right-hand corner—a convention for stating the fact that it is what is said and not what is written that is approved. The script was then polished once more, and published as Vollebæk (1998).
There is anecdotal evidence suggesting that the argument made here about how speeches are made may be generalized to other Foreign Ministries and foreign policy-making institutions in late-modern states. A former Swedish diplomat who read an earlier draft commented that it may just as well have been about his own Foreign Ministry. A senior British diplomat responded by saying that dovetailed not only with her own experience in Britain, but also with what she had seen during her several and various postings abroad. Furthermore, a Former American speech-writer comments on his experiences in the following way:

Anyone with experience writing speeches—as I did for Jimmy Carter, during the campaign and in the White House, a quarter century ago—knows that composition is the easy part. […] if the writer has, say, a couple of hours, he or she has a chance of batting out an interesting draft that advances one or two main themes. A full day might be better—but not a full week, because that leaves time for the hard part: fending off the countless advisers who want to “tune” and “improve” the speech. […] the more time available to work on a presidential speech, the more complex and bogged down it becomes. The extreme example is a State of the Union address: everyone in the government has a year to see it coming and to try to work in his or her favorite causes (Fallows 2001:43–44).

However, my own material also suggests that the argument may be broadened beyond speech writing, to embrace text production and hence Foreign Ministry work in general. For example, in 2001, the Foreign Ministry set out to produce a so-called country strategy on the United States. Country strategies are relatively short documents (around 10 pages) that outline and, ideally, rank the challenges to the bilateral relationship in order of importance, so that decision makers in specific policy areas may have an opportunity to link the practical question of what to do in a specific situation to a wider and presumably official “line” on the relationship overall. In this case, the secretary of state in charge insisted that the initial work should be done by a task force of mid-level diplomats working independently of their Heads of Department. When I asked him why, he gave as his reason that recent work on other country strategies had been hampered by turf battles between the departments on how to rank challenges, with each Department holding out for their tasks to head the list. By trying to create space within the organization for horizontal work, he said, he wanted to postpone this part of the process, so that substance would be given a chance. As a member of the group, I was immediately made aware of two problems. First, the Heads of Department were not particularly sympathetic to the idea that work should be moved from the chain of command to a staff element, and initiated a series of more or less subtle practices to extend their authority into the work of the task force. For example, when I bumped into her on my way in to the first meeting, another member reported that her Head of Department had been on the phone twice in order to learn about and discuss the agenda of the meeting. Secondly, it quickly transpired that the mid-level diplomats, too, were intent on ranking the tasks of “their” Departments highest. Furthermore, once the draft was made subject to the usual internal hearing, 10 stations, five Departments, and two sections delivered written comments, and countless others weighed in with more informal suggestions. The work was firmly back in the chain of command. As a result, when it was presented by the foreign minister to a group of American-Norwegians meeting in Seattle, WA, where I happened to be present, it was criticized for not being clear enough. Press coverage of the formal launch in Oslo fastened on the same point. The strategy document, which in the process had ended up looking very much like other strategy documents on other countries, quietly disappeared, never to surface again. I asked the secretary in charge of what he made of the experience. “That’s the way the system works,” he said and shrugged.
One year later, I was in charge of coordinating the announcement of some money for research. The announcement was supposed to include a list of topics on which the MFA would particularly welcome research. The drawing up of the list, which was an internal Department affairs and so involved sections and special advisors rather than Departments, followed the same logic. For example, one head of section noted to one of her underlings that “We were able to have [topic X] included ... (’Vi fikk med...’).” The turn of phrase is actually the same one that I reported above, in the context of having a diplomat note that I had had “my parts” included in a speech held by the foreign minister. When the Head of Department tried to shorten the list, the argument that this and that topic had to be included so that it should not look as if the MFA did not follow events closely (“ikkje følger med i timen”) was enough to rebuff him. Everybody should be heard, and everything should be included. The result was a list of topics that looked suspiciously similar to the list presented the year before. A speech, a strategy document, and a list of topics that the MFA should like to have researched by externals are rather different kinds of written material, but they are drawn up in similar ways. As a result, they tend to be vague, and tend to look similar to one another. To the bureaucrat, this means speaking in one voice. To the politician who heads the ministry, however, what may matter more is what is being said. To him or her, the system may not do its job when it does its job in the way it always has. If so, then change will reach the interior of the organization from its margins, where the costs of nonadaptability is most keenly felt. Change in diplomacy may therefore be expected to be initiated by politicians, not by diplomats themselves.

It is the task of a Foreign Ministry, which by definition consists of widely different units, to join together in a higher unity in such a way that the seams between them come to be as invisible as possible. Each section mediates in relation to various human collectives outside the Ministry. If a foreign ministry is to maintain its unity, as must every and all organizations, it must maintain its own integrative processes. In the case of the Norwegian MFA, speech writing turned out to be one such process. It is among other things because speech writing is so important as a common ministerial concern that informing and convincing the audience of the message in each speech is not held to be important. Speech writing is first and foremost a question of ministerial identity building. Information and argumentation is important enough, but the organization’s self-confirmation and the cementation of working relations between each part of the organization and between each employee are of greater importance. When the ministerial employees returned from speech-writing courses, they relate that the lecturer—whether it was an employee of the Prime Minister’s Office or an American professional speech writer—has emphasized the unity of the speech, and that it can only by unitary if there is one person who supervises its writing and has the final say. The expression for this is that one person should “sit on the lap of the Minister” (i.e., have his ear). The American President has a crew of speech writers consisting of a domestic and a foreign section. While Roosevelt gave around 80 speeches a year, Clinton averaged about 500, and thus he found it necessary to leave the writing to a dozen employees who worked directly for him, independently of the State Department. In the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, since the Foreign Secretary made the speeches part of his political arsenal, they have also been torn away from the bureaucracy. If a future Norwegian foreign minister were to insist that the speeches he or she were to hold should first and foremost be politically effective in relation to domestic and

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5A former minister reported in an informal luncheon talk at the Ministry in October 2002 that when he had taken up the post, “I wanted a speech writer in each department, but was immediately told that there could be no need for this when we had the secretariat. [...] I am certain that what we received was strong on substance (”faglig sterkt”), but actually, I could not always use it.” This comment sparked no reaction from any of the forty diplomats present, however.
foreign political groupings, then the Norwegian Foreign ministry would also have
to give up its speech-writing procedures. As noted above, this has already happened
in the case of the British Foreign Office. It has also happened in a number of other
Norwegian ministries. In an increasing degree, it even happens in the Secretariat of
the Human Rights minister within the Foreign Ministry itself. These developments,
however, seem to have no effect on how speech writing proceeds inside the (rest of)
the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One may conclude that, as long as
diplomats take care of speech writing, the speeches will continue to look like the
Foreign Ministry’s notes and White Papers, for the simple reason that all such types
of text are produced in the same manner. They are all texts that the entire Ministry
may stand for, and thus they are not first and foremost expressions of the points of
view of particular politicians or instantiations of particular fields, but instantiations
of the Ministry as such.

When the entire Ministry can stand behind a speech, it is because the speech is
the Ministry. The Ministry exists among other things because it purports to speak
with one voice, and it is therefore important that this voice rings as unequivocally, as
often, and as clearly as possible. That is why the number of speeches that are not
written by the entire Ministry is minimized, and notes that have no place in the
bureaucratic scale are weeded out. As long as the politicians themselves do not
intervene, nothing new will emanate from the Foreign Ministry. From the point of
view of the bureaucrat, it is thus only when the system does not work that something
new is produced, because the fact that something new is produced means precisely
that the system has failed. Civil servants in the Foreign Ministry do not find this
paradoxical. On the contrary, they see it as evidence that the civil service functions
as it is supposed to. To many people on the outside it is a mystery why the Foreign
Ministry never produces anything new, when one by continuing as previously, one
increasingly and undeniably loses out in the competition with other policy gener-
ators. Nonetheless, because of the structure of its discourse, the Foreign Ministry
will continue to produce speeches that the entire Ministry can stand for until the
political leadership forces through greater audience targeting by changing the
routines for writing speeches. The change can only come from the outside. If the
Norwegian Foreign Ministry follows the British Foreign Office in this question, the
reaction of the diplomats to any change will probably constitute no more than a
lament that the old modus is being abandoned. The question of whether there are
in fact exogenous reasons for such a change of routine would probably go undis-
cussed. The British example indicates that diplomats do not learn lessons in
this regard but rather rest content with lamenting the loss of the speech-writing
function.

Michael Herzfeld has argued that

As [Claude] Lefort has suggested, the paradox of bureaucracy is that the larger it
grows, the more differentiated it becomes internally, and the more easily special
interests are able to hide behind a mask of disinterested and objective rationality.

Even at the top, then, despite [Jack] Goody’s account of the state as the primary
agent of centralization, it is only the outer form of the discourse that is monolithic.

It should hardly be a matter for surprise that the rhetoric of common interest
sometimes turns out to be very thinly spread indeed (Herzfeld 1992:102).

The speech-writing process in the Foreign Ministry is an example of this kind of
invariance, and of how one in accordance with Herzfeld’s main thesis is program-
matically insensitive in relation to external parties, who in this case are the audi-
ences for speeches. This insensitivity can be sufficiently explained by pointing out
that the discourse—in this case the system of genres, routines, and interaction that
makes it possible to make a speech—has an inbuilt inertia that causes input from
foreign elements such as myself to be repelled, and the speeches to remain as they
were. Herzfeld’s hypothesis that “even at the top [of the state] it is only the outer form of the discourse that is monolithic,” is confirmed. However, one would underestimate the diplomat if one thought that the speeches were not communicative at all. The speeches, at least the good speeches, are communicative for those who have the cultural competence to understand them, namely the diplomats of other countries (as well as a few highly specialized journalists and academics).

Speech writing is embedded in general diplomatic culture. As far as this culture is concerned, the drama in this story is a different one, namely how politicians in Great Britain, the United States, and probably with time Norway too have to force through a greater degree of audience targeting from their civil servants as it increasingly becomes the task of diplomacy to mediate between other actors than the diplomats and political leaders of sovereign states. Diplomacy as an institution is altered, but, and this is decisive, not from the inside. The inertia in the discourse is further underlined by the fact that in a number of other contexts there is endless discussion about how the Foreign Ministry has to relate to a steadily increasing number of non-governmental actors. These other contexts unanimously indicate that in connection with speeches one should consider how one can and should relate to other actors than Foreign Ministries, in order to get them to assimilate one’s own representations of reality and in order to win as allies in political struggles. Nonetheless, the rigidity of speech writing is so great that diplomats do not see it as relevant that those shifts that are taking place with regard to diplomatic culture in general should have any consequences for this discourse in particular. The only potential for dynamicity is with the politicians. My material therefore supports the claim of Mary Douglas (1986:111) that “the individual tends to leave the important decisions to his institutions while busying himself with tactics and details,” if one in the case of speech writing sees the decision to influence the audience and (thus) retain responsibility for speech writing as the most important one, with the opportunities this gives for implementing one’s will both within the Ministry and on the outside.

The common sense of the diplomats however leaves no room for the type of impatience that gives rise to the preceding argument. “You write that there is no change in the Foreign Ministry, but there is,” George commented after having read a draft, “it is just that it is more glacial.” He is right—diplomatic culture has, in a long-term perspective, proven to be most dynamic. The point that change can only be initiated externally made little impression on him, because it is the nature of the job to leave initiative up to the political leadership. A diplomat is, among other things, a bureaucrat who implements and maintains the policy of the political leadership at any given time. If one cannot accept that, one has to leave. That was what a few prominent British diplomats did after the Suez crisis in 1956, when it became clear that they could not accept British policy. There have also been several such cases in the United States, and there are numerous examples of politicians who have found the diplomatic habit of following orders unbearably sheepish. “They never have any idea over there . . . never come up with anything new . . . the State Department is a bowl of jelly” (anon., cited in Schlesinger 1967:406; comp. Sofer 2001). The State Department’s nickname is “foggy bottom.” Harold Nicolson the diplomat who has written best about the profession during the 19th century, is clear on this point: “The impassivity that characterizes the ideal diplomatist must render him much disliked by his friends” (1963:117; Otte 2001). It was probably this impassivity that Kennedy reacted to, and that I describe above. For the diplomat, however, impassivity is the hallmark of excellence, and Norwegian politicians have been far less critical to this than have many of their American counterparts. In an interview with former Norwegian foreign minister Thorvald Stoltenberg, I asked him whether there had been any negative reactions from the bureaucracy when he brought Egeland into the Foreign Ministry as State Secretary, from the Red Cross? He answered:
You know you are barking up the wrong tree. I would seldom hear any negative reactions, and then only after a long time. I understood that there were certain reactions to the activity and to the new way of handling issues, but that was one of the reasons why I had asked him to come.

It was in order to complement the foreign policy repertoire of the state that he had brought in Egeland, and the bureaucracy had adjusted to that. A good diplomat remains, as they frequently put it, “actively expectant” (“aktivt avventende”), to developments in the world at large as well as in his or her own profession (Neumann 2005).

**Conclusion**

A hundred anthropologists have pointed out that the Weberian bureaucrat is the human being that never was (Weber 1968; e.g. Bailey 1969; Clastres 1977; Handler and Leyton 1978). Since Arendt’s study of Eichmann in Jerusalem, social scientists have in an increasing degree considered indifference and not rationality as the hallmark of bureaucracy. Michael Barnett’s (1997) analysis of how the ordering of work at the United Nations first made him an instant Rwanda expert and then, when reports about an unfolding genocide began to trickle in, made him give priority to matters organizational and hence indifferent, demonstrates that this reading is no less apposite than it was under high modernity. Indeed, it may be that there is something about the particularization of the work process and the routinization, which makes the bureaucratic way of being in the world spread, so that the life of bureaucrats has become and is becoming representative of more general processes of the formation of the self under post modernity. Caroline Casey (1995) study of life in a United States–based transnational high-tech presents empirical findings that point in this direction. In industrial societies, she argues, the major principle of the division of labor is that each profession has its more or less fixed domain (Abbott 1988). Under what she terms “designer capitalism,” however, the building blocks are no longer professions, but what she calls “discursive means of production,” which may be learnt in a number of ways other than educational training for membership of a particular profession. Seen from the employer’s point of view, subject positions tied to professions become less central, but no one new set of subject positions emerge to take their place. Thus,

replacing occupation as a primary locus of class and self-identification in the corporate workplace is team and knowledge […] Relationship to a product, to team-family members and to the company displaces identification with occupation and its historic repository of skills, knowledges and allegiances (Casey 1995:109).

This situation, she argues, produces a “colluded self,” a narcissistic way of being in the world, which is “dependent, over-agreeable, compulsive in dedication and diligence, passionate about the product and the company. The colluded self is comforted by primary narcissistic gratifications of identification with a workplace family free of the older attractions of occupation- and class-based solidarities” (Casey 1995:191). Designer capitalism produces designer employees.

Diplomats, who make a living from mediating between a number of disparate and not necessarily connected worlds and who change their place in the Ministry on average every two and a half to three years, must be considered among the pioneers of this kind of work market. “When you have been in the Ministry for two years and done two [three-year] tours, you have forgotten your profession,” George answered when I noted that he complained about his dull everyday routine and suggested that he go back to his onetime profession as an economics researcher.
Instead of a guild-type professional identity, there is the more fleeting kind that is characteristic of uniplex and nomadic work communities like sailors, lumber-jacks—and diplomats. Such professions foreshadow general trends in the work market in another sense as well. If Arlie Hochschild (1997) is right in holding that there is a shift afoot with the workplace becoming more important for personal identity than family, then the world is following in the footsteps of these nomadic professions. When a life-long student of diplomacy wanted to pinpoint the eminent trait of that profession, he highlighted exactly how the diplomat is uniquely skilled in gathering a particular kind of information that is essential to the conduct of international relations. This is information about the views and policies of a country’s political leadership, now and in the near future. It is knowledge of personalities rather than of the forces and conditions which shape a country’s policy over the long term. It is knowledge of the current situation and how it is likely to develop rather than of the pattern of past regularities. It derives from day-to-day personal dealings with the leading political strata in the country to which a diplomatist is accredited, sometimes to the detriment of his understanding of society at large in that country (Bull 1977:181).

Diplomats have always prided themselves of their practical knowledge such as the ability to “hold a parenthesis” (i.e., not give in on a formulation) during a negotiation, what they themselves refer to by a German term as their Fingerspitzengefühl or touch, that is, in Casey’s terms, their dependence on “discursive means of production.” Of course, being a diplomat is in itself a profession. Perhaps with the arrival of designer capitalism it is a profession whose time has come. But if so, it is exactly not because of diplomacy’s standing as a profession, but rather because diplomacy was first in systematizing, a habitus, which now seems to spread to ever new areas of postindustrial societies.

All this is, it seems, of only tangential interest to most diplomats, who, at least when posted at home, concentrate on their daily working life. In his work on the Ndembu, Turner (1964:41) observes that Ndembu mothers and their daughters have a lot to quarrel about, that these quarrels are in some degree emically understood as what is ethically called role conflicts, but that “It is rather as though there existed in certain precisely defined public situations, usually of a ritual and ceremonial type, a norm obstructing the verbal statement of conflicts in any way connected with the principle and rules celebrated or dramatized in those situations.” On the strength of the above, speech writing in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs must also be said to be a “certain precisely defined public situation.” Certainly, Turner himself rightly generalizes in this direction when he writes that

Social life in all organised groups appears to exhibit a cyclicity or oscillation between periods when one set of axiomatic norms are observed and periods when they give way to the dominance of another set. Thus since different norms govern different aspects or sectors of social behaviour, and, more importantly, since the sectors overlap and interpenetrate in reality, causing norm-conflict, the validity of several major norms has to be reaffirmed in isolation from others, and outside the contexts in which struggles and conflicts arise in connexion with them. This is why one so often finds in ritual that dogmatic and symbolic emphasis is laid on a single norm or on a cluster of closely, and on the whole harmoniously, inter-related norms in a single kind of ritual (Turner 1964:43).

Diplomats are no different. For diplomats working at home, the ceremonial act of producing documents is dominant and constitutive. In a large degree, it takes the place of the information-gathering that is said to dominate work abroad and which

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6Compare Scott’s (1998) analysis of diplomacy as practical skill (“metis”).
is held by diplomats themselves to be more characteristic of their profession (Neumann 2005). It has often been said that the credo of diplomatic work is “don’t rock the boat.” This analysis demonstrates that there is an isomorphism between this credo and the credo of organizational life inside the Foreign Ministry itself.

References


