Blame Avoidance
in Government Communication

An exploratory study of the defensive discursive strategies

used by government communicators in the United Kingdom

in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the late 2000s

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I declare that this thesis is my own work, and has not been submitted in substantially the same form for the award of a higher degree elsewhere.

Abstract

Governments' policies and actions often precipitate public blame firestorms and mediated scandals targeted at individual or collective policy makers. In the face of losing credibility and resources, officeholders are tempted to apply strategies of blame avoidance which permeate administrative structures, operations, and language use. Linguistic aspects of blame avoidance are yet to be studied by discourse analysts in great detail. It is necessary to develop a more sophisticated, context-sensitive understanding of how blame avoidance affects public communication practices of governments, because certain defensive ways of communicating may curb democratic deliberation in society.

In this thesis, I propose a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting defensive discursive strategies adopted by government communicators in the circumstances of blame risk. I do this by engaging with a set of recent empirical data (samples of text, talk, and images produced by the British government at critical moments in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the late 2000s; field data from the backstage of British government communication), and integrating political science literature on the politics of blame avoidance with the linguistically rooted discourse-historical approach to the study of social problems.

I show how reactive and anticipative blame avoidance in government communication involves the use of particular strategies of arguing, framing, denying, representing social actors and actions, legitimating, and discursive manipulation. I argue that officeholders' discursive practices of blame avoidance should be interpreted in relation to various conceptualisations of 'government communication', understood within the frames of a discursively constructed 'blame game', and analysed as multimodal defensive performances.

This is a multidisciplinary exploratory study that I hope will open up new avenues for future research into government blame games, and, more broadly, into blame phenomena in political and organisational life.

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1. Introduction

Over many centuries, numerous helpful 'check lists' have been devised by various authors who have sought to inform and educate the public about the (mis)uses of language in public life. An early case in point is the 4th century B.C. *On Rhetoric*, where Aristotle (2007) made a seminal distinction between three forms of persuasion – appeals to character, emotions, and reason (*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*) – used in speech situations. Aristotle wanted his students to learn how to recognise when a speaker was trying to manipulate them, and this threefold model provided a useful starting point for discussions about the nature of civic discourse and its uses for good or ill.

In *The Book of Fallacies*, English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1824) listed around 50 'political fallacies' that in his view characterised the British parliamentary discourse at the beginning of the 19th century. This work was explicitly motivated by his hope that when people become aware of and alert to the 'fallaciousness' (from Bentham's utilitarian perspective) of the rhetorical moves employed by the Members of Parliament to block certain radical reforms, such 'misuse' of language would become obsolete and the reforms would go ahead.

Between 1937–1942, several lists of propaganda techniques were compiled and widely distributed in the U.S. by an organisation called the Institute for Propaganda Analysis. The aim of the Institute was to teach American citizens to recognise and 'deal with' Nazi propaganda. The most well-known list contained descriptions of seven common propaganda 'tricks', which were given memorable names, such as 'Glittering Generality' and 'Band Wagon' (see Marlin, 2002, pp. 102–106).

After the end of the Second World War, English author and critic George Orwell (1968) published an essay "Politics and the English Language" where he famously lamented that political speech and writing at the time was "designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (p. 139). He listed and described "various of the tricks by means of which the work of prose-construction is habitually dodged" (Orwell, 1968, p. 130), such as the frequent use of worn-out metaphors and passive constructions, hoping that spotting

and avoiding such usages would enable his readers 'think more clearly' and thereby bring about 'political regeneration'.

Over the past decades, the proponents of critical linguistics and critical discourse studies have produced various heuristic devices[1] – models or outlines of ideal types – that focus on distinct formal properties of texts to illuminate the (often subtle) ways in which the political elites and media personalities use language to belittle vulnerable/minority groups and exclude them from having a say in public debates. For example, Ruth Wodak (2011, 2015) has outlined five general types of discursive strategies that are commonly used in political life for the purpose of positive self- and negative other-presentation. (I will discuss these in detail later in section 3.2). Critical studies of political discourse seek to provide citizens with the resources for building critical language awareness that is essential for comprehending the linguistically mediated power in contemporary societies.

> Given that power relations work increasingly at an implicit level through language, and given that language practices are increasingly targets for intervention and control, a critical awareness of language is a prerequisite for effective citizenship, and a democratic entitlement. (Fairclough, 2013, p. 534)

What I am trying to do in this thesis bears a similarity to these works. Just like the authors mentioned above, I am ultimately hoping to contribute to improving citizens' lives by educating them about the possible effects of particular ways of symbolic expression in public life (i.e., civic discourse). However, I have chosen a specific focus that sets this thesis apart from previous works that seek to promote critical language awareness: I attempt to integrate the contemporary methods of discourse studies with current knowledge of administrative blame avoidance to improve our understanding of the ways in which language and other symbolic resources are used by modern government communicators for the purpose of holding on to power.

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[1] The term 'heuristic' derives from ancient Greek word *heuriskein*, meaning 'to find' or 'discover'. In the social sciences, a heuristic device is understood as an analytical tool, often in the form of a model, diagram, or metaphor, which helps to discover particular social phenomena and relations between them. Heuristic devices 'tell' researchers 'what to look for' as they interact with their data, and provide 'sign posts' or 'check lists' that they can choose to follow throughout the research process.

Why is this relevant? If we assume that in modern pluralist democracies government outsiders should be able to participate in shaping their political and social world, then one of the preconditions for this is the capacity to assess the behaviour of public officeholders, including the ways in which they make and deliver policies, arrange government institutions, and communicate with the public. When officeholders' behaviour does not satisfy the purposes and needs of citizens, the latter should be able to challenge and possibly change the circumstances in which they find themselves. This may be achieved by expressing discontent with officeholders' actions – that is, by blaming them – thereby forcing them to either leave their office or to modify their behaviour. To hold on to power, officeholders may try to use language in such ways that would impair or bias the public understanding of (potentially) harmful events and their causes, and derail or block debates over blame issues. When government outsiders become proficient in spotting such (often subtle) moves, they can gain a more adequate understanding of the situation and avoid being manipulated.

As will become clear in the course of the following chapters, defensive communicative behaviour in government is a complex social phenomenon. In modern democracies, communication with the public is widely seen as a core activity of the executive government. Citizens expect to have some access to information regarding the workings of the public administrators and to be able to engage in some form of interaction with those in power to influence their behaviour. This arguably constitutes a minimal prerequisite of 'democracy' as a form of government characterised as 'rule by the people'.[2] Politicians working in executive offices are expected to talk and listen to their constituents. And most government institutions employ communication professionals, who are explicitly tasked with establishing and maintaining relationships with people and organisations that are external to the institution and, as a minimum, informing them of certain policies, decisions, and actions of their organisation that affect people's lives. However, in dealing with issues revolving around clashes of interests, struggles for power, and various risks and crises, governments are unavoidably positioned in the middle of a plurality of conflicts and dilemmas. Governments' policies and actions often precipitate public blame firestorms and mediated scandals, propagated by their internal or external adversaries

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[2] For a concise discussion regarding the ambiguity of the concept of 'rule by the people', see, for instance, Held (1996, pp. 1-4).

and targeted at individual or collective policy makers. In the face of losing credibility and power, officeholders are tempted to apply strategies of blame avoidance that permeate administrative structures, operations, and language use (Hood, 2011). For example, officeholders may try to avoid blame by delegating potentially offensive tasks to suitable 'scapegoats', by establishing rigid working routines that minimise individual discretion and seemingly 'diffuse' blame when something goes wrong, and by evading blame-implicating questions posed by the press. While such strategic behaviour may help officeholders to hold on to their job and income, sustain the functioning of their organisation and, more broadly, preserve the existing social order, this may not always be beneficial from the perspective of government outsiders whose interests and concerns are thereby disregarded.

All governments can be conceived of as busy playgrounds of a variety of 'blame games' – performances designed to attribute blame to someone or to deflect blame from someone for causing something negative. The public communication practices of a government within a blame game may either encourage or discourage social learning, that is, the processes by which people both in- and outside of government make sense of each other's perspectives and attitudes, gain moral insight, and reproduce shared meaning. Surprisingly, however, the intersection of government communication and blame avoidance has received rather limited academic attention. Scholars of political communication have paid most attention to election campaigns and presidential rhetoric in the United States, often neglecting the discursive analysis of other contexts of government communication (Canel & Sanders, 2013). There is a body of political science literature that deals with the 'politics of blame avoidance' (e.g., Hood, 2002, 2011; Stone, 1989; Weaver, 1986) and a body of literature informed by sociology of media and communication that deals with various mediated 'blame phenomena' like political scandals and organisational crises (e.g., Thompson, 2000; Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Entman, 2012). And indeed, there are many studies that provide insights into what may be broadly categorised as 'defensive communicative behaviour' covering topics such as face-work and remedial interchanges (e.g., Goffman, 1969, 1981), accounting, apologia and excuses (e.g., Scott & Lyman, 1968; Ware & Linkugel, 1973; Ryan, 1982; Buttny, 1993; Benoit, 1995), evading, sidestepping and agenda-shifting (Galasiński, 2000; Clayman & Heritage, 2002), legitimising (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), and denying (van Dijk, 1992).

However, to date, there are no substantial empirical works within (critical) discourse studies that focus specifically on dissecting blame avoidance in government communication – notwithstanding that most democratic governments engage in public communication practices that habitually involve dealing with issues of blame. My thesis is a step towards filling this gap in our knowledge.

1.1 What this thesis is about and what it is *not* about

The impetus for writing this thesis arose from a combination of keen personal interest and a lucky coincidence. I had previously studied media and journalism, and worked as a civil servant, and was fascinated by what I saw as conflictual aspects or paradoxes of government communication. It seemed that while governments were obsessed with 'building trust' through public communication, it was taken for granted in Western democracies that people are generally distrustful of administrators and their messages. It also seemed that while civil servants who spoke on behalf of their government claimed to be open, impartial and 'politically neutral' in their actions, governments were often perceived by outsiders to be 'miscommunicating' and 'spin doctoring', or perhaps even habitually lying. Governments and individual officeholders seemed to be, on the one hand, resourceful agents with considerable power over people's lives, and, on the other hand, self-evident targets of choice for blame attacks by news media and critical commentators of all sorts. I believed that government communicators faced several difficult dilemmas in their work, and that these were not always explicitly discussed. As I searched for literature dealing specifically with such aspects of government communication, there seemed to be very few scholars who addressed these issues in detail.

But then, rather coincidentally, I happened to read two interesting and insightful books at the same time. One of these was *Discourse of Politics in Action* by linguist Ruth Wodak (2011) and the other one *The Blame Game* by political scientist Christopher Hood (2011). As I was reading these monographs, I recognised and enthusiastically agreed with many of their central ideas.

Hood wrote about blame avoidance as a useful angle from which to interpret the behaviour of government officeholders. He conceptualised blaming as an activity with two central components: identifying some loss that is perceived as avoidable at a

certain time, and attributing agency for causing that loss to some individual or entity (blame taker). Hence, *blame avoidance* as an activity involves attempts by government officeholders as (potential) blame takers to manipulate others' perception of loss and agency to limit the risks related to receiving blame from them (e.g., social embarrassment, losing one's job). Hood claimed that once you start looking for instances of blame avoidance then you seem to find these almost everywhere in public administration: in the ways government officeholders use language, how they structure their institutions, and how they organise their operations. Some of their defensive behaviour is reactive (i.e., when officeholders respond to blame attacks) and some is anticipative (i.e., measures they take to 'stop blame before it starts', or to reduce their 'exposure' to potential blame attacks). I was particularly interested in what Hood called 'presentational strategies' of blame avoidance – ways of either engaging in arguments over blame issues or avoiding these arguments – as these seemed to most directly affect the ways governments communicate with and relate to people outside government. Importantly, certain ways of avoiding blame could be seen as detrimental to democratic deliberation over public matters as they may be designed to avoid critical questions from arising, derail ongoing debates, or bring them to an abrupt end.

Wodak wrote about performative and linguistic aspects of 'politics as usual', how officeholders in political institutions present themselves to others, how people make sense of these presentations, and what might be the broader socio-political implications of these practices. She was particularly concerned with spotting and interpreting links between micro-sociological instances of text and talk and broader social and political phenomena, and she devised a useful set of concepts, principles, and methods, dubbed *the discourse-historical approach*, for carrying out such analyses (see Appendix A). Wodak highlighted the idea, originally developed by the sociologist Erving Goffman, that people tend to behave and present themselves differently in front of external audiences, that is, in the 'frontstage', compared to more concealed 'backstage' environments where they are not under direct public scrutiny. I realised that the deep contradictions between frontstage and backstage behaviour could be one of the reasons why governments seem to be predisposed to mystify and hide certain aspects of their work.

While reading these two books, I started to think how combining the two approaches – political science knowledge about officeholders' motivations and the inner workings of government institutions on the one hand, and discourse-analytical detailed understanding of the performative and linguistic elements of 'politics as usual' on the other hand – could lead to new insights into how governments communicate with the public. Indeed, in his book, Hood noted the importance of identifying specific discursive features that characterise government officeholders' persuasive communication. He wrote:

> Much presentational activity for blame avoidance consists of getting the words precisely right in the same way that a poet agonises over every syllable and inflection – going though all those endlessly tricky choices and nice judgments to hit the proper note of contrition, craft the excuse that is powerful enough to silence critics and skeptics, and find the killer argument that can convincingly show that what might be seen as a major loss is really a blessing, or at least is not as bad as it seems. (Hood, 2011, p. 56).

Linguistics as an academic field – and its sub-field discourse studies in particular – has been long concerned with developing the specialist vocabulary and conceptual tools for describing the ways in which persuasion is 'done' with a particular focus on speech, writing, and other symbolic equipment. Hence, I began to entertain the idea that Hood's framework of presentational strategies of blame avoidance in government could be developed further and operationalised for a *linguistically informed empirical study of blame avoidance in government communication* – and that Wodak's discourse-historical approach to analysing social problems could provide a suitable conceptual scaffolding as well as the necessary analytic tools for such a study.

Accordingly, in my thesis, I set out to investigate defensive uses of language and other semiotic resources by government officeholders, guided by the following central research question: *How to identify and interpret discursive blame avoidance in government communication?*

A critical approach to government communication

In simple terms, 'government communication' can be conceived of as oral, written, and visual language use by and on behalf of government officeholders, directed at the

general public or particular groups in society. From the discourse-historical perspective (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009; Wodak, 2011), government communication belongs to the arena of *political action*. The word 'political' has several meanings and dimensions (see, for instance, Palonen, 2003), but in broad terms, it integrates two contradictory senses:

> On the one hand, politics is viewed as a struggle for power, between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it. … On the other hand, politics is viewed as cooperation, as the practices and institutions that a society has for resolving clashes of interest over money, influence, liberty, and the like. (Chilton, 2004, p. 3)

In government communication, like in politics in general, language is used *strategically*, that is, text, talk, and images are employed with a goal to manage the interests of the speaker/writer. Discourse analyst Paul Chilton (2004, pp. 45–46) posits that language use in politics can serve three broad and often intertwined strategic functions: coercion, (de)legitimisation, and (mis)representation. This three-fold distinction can be usefully applied to guide our thinking about the functions of language in government communication.

1. Language use of the executive government can be backed by legal and physical sanctions. A government can issue commands and use its non-linguistic resources (e.g., the police, courts, and prisons) to punish those who do not comply. Governments and government officeholders are therefore often perceived as powerful, high-status actors and their requests, choices of conversational topics, and assumptions of shared knowledge and beliefs are frequently accepted by government outsiders even without the actual threat of coercion. Coercive power is also exercised by government officeholders when they censor others' language use, limit the public dissemination of certain kinds of information, and regulate the arenas of communication (e.g., by introducing policies that affect the work of journalists or social media platforms).

2. Governments use language to establish and maintain their right to be obeyed by citizens. Such legitimising may involve arguing in favour of certain courses of action chosen by the officeholders and engaging in positive self-

presentation (e.g., boasting about achievements of the government). On the other hand, governments use language to delegitimise various opponents by presenting them in a more negative light, sometimes blaming, insulting, or marginalising them, and presenting alternative courses of action proposed by opponents as undesirable.

3. Governments try to control the amount and the quality of information that they give out. When government officeholders produce linguistic representations of events, actors, or objects, they often omit or substitute some elements. They may also add new elements or rearrange the sequence of events in their stories. Misrepresentation can involve manipulative moves like lying, verbal evasion, and the use of euphemisms with the goal of 'blurring' the audience's understanding of some aspect of reality.

I seek to illuminate the strategic character of government communication in the context of blame risk: how officeholders employ language as a means to hold on to power. In so doing, I align myself with the 'critical' stance taken in discourse-historical studies, and attend to the three related aspects of critique (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 88):

- *text-immanent critique*: analysing texts produced by officeholders to spot inconsistencies, self-contradictions and paradoxes within them;
- *socio-diagnostic critique*: using contextual knowledge to interpret concrete discursive events and uncover the more or less manifest persuasive character of officeholders' language use; and
- *prospective critique*: formulating suggestions as to how communication could be improved in the future.

I will provide a more fine-grained discussion of what assuming a 'critical' stance toward government communication may mean in Chapter 2. For now, it should suffice to say that the approaches to government communication can be most broadly categorised under two analytic ideal types: administrative and critical. The authors who adopt 'administrative approaches' focus on the 'how to' of governing, leadership, management, and communication; generally take the perspective of leaders; tend to presume instrumental rationality of actors, and to idealise stability, efficiency, and certainty (e.g., Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, 2003; Carpenter & Krause, 2012;

Gelders & Ihlen, 2010; Gregory, 2006, 2008; Horsley, Liu, & Levenshus, 2010; Lee, 2007; Vos, 2006). Informed by positive political theory, they prefer to study their subject matter using formal methods such as statistical analysis, public choice theory, and game theory. The authors who subscribe to 'critical approaches' focus on contested meanings, inequalities and (latent) conflicts in society; generally take the perspective of the individual (or an oppressed group) rather than leadership or 'system'; reject the idea that social phenomena can be adequately explained in terms of economic and technological variables; and tend to accept higher levels of ambiguity and uncertainty (e.g., Coleman & Blumler, 2011; Edelman, 1977; Fairclough, 2000; Stone, 2012; Wodak, 2011). My approach to the subject matter of my research is significantly influenced by the works of scholars who belong to that latter camp. I wish to provide a contribution to the scholarly literature broadly dealing with symbolic aspects of politics and bureaucracy, and especially with conflicts and paradoxes inherent in public communication.

A multidisciplinary study of defensive discourses

My work is formally a thesis in applied linguistics. It is couched in the broad field of discourse studies, sharing its roots with rhetorical criticism, hermeneutics, literary stylistics, and (socio-)pragmatics. However, I recognise that the topic of my study – blame avoidance in government communication – can be explored from a variety of disciplinary angles. I wish to avoid wearing narrowly discipline-specific lenses that may (unwittingly) filter out potentially very useful insights and approaches.[3] Instead, I treat my research as a multidisciplinary (or post-disciplinary) endeavour.[4] For

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[3] For example, the editors of the most recent issue of *The SAGE Handbook of Political Communication* (Semetko & Scammell, 2012) emphasise the importance of scholarly work published by political scientists and economists but do not even mention political linguistics or political discourse studies.

[4] For a solid argument for embracing post-disciplinarity, see Sayer (1999). As I explicitly try to bridge multiple disciplines in this thesis, I am aware that my work may attract criticism from multiple directions. For instance, some linguists may dismiss it as 'too political' while some political scientists may complain that it is 'merely about text and talk'. My response to this would be that my study is exploratory and problem oriented – and hence implies transcending disciplinary boundaries and using an eclectic set of theories and methods. Indeed, this characteristic is common to all critical approaches to discourse studies (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Research into government communication and blame avoidance would benefit from combining theoretical, methodological and practical insights from sociology, political science, philosophy, linguistics, communication studies, cultural and media studies, economics, law, and (social) psychology, as well as their more specific sub-disciplines (or particular research traditions within them), for instance, public administration and policy, political discourse studies or political linguistics, rhetoric and argumentation studies, media sociology, and political psychology.

example, with regard to conceptualising and operationalising 'blame avoidance' (Chapters 3 and 4), I draw upon and synthesise at least three distinctive streams of literature. First, I embrace perceptive works emanating from political science that deal with blame games in public administration, the use of causal stories in political struggle, and blame avoidance as a policy motivation (e.g., Hood, 2002, 2011; Stone, 1989, 2012; Weaver, 1986). These works are government-centred, and are strongly grounded in a thorough theoretical and conceptual understanding of politics and the inner workings of administrative institutions. However, while their approaches provide many useful insights, they are not particularly concerned with close analysis of empirical linguistic data. Second, I align myself with studies in sociology, media, and communication that help us understand mediatisation of politics, the nature of scandal, and the mediated construals of (political) crises and failures in society (e.g., Adut, 2008; Allern & Pollack, 2012; Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Entman, 2012; Schudson, 2008; Thompson, 2000). These treatises are driven by social, cultural, and communication theories as well as a sound comprehension of the functions, effects, and daily workings of the (news) media. However, they rarely pay attention to minute linguistic detail when looking at mediated text and talk about blame issues. And third, there are works by linguists who conjointly provide a wide and very useful inventory of discursive resources often used in blame games (e.g., Wodak, 2006a; Lakoff, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; van Dijk, 1992, 2006; van Leeuwen, 2008). These writings demonstrate great interest in and sensitivity to naturally occurring language and aim at explaining how the use of certain linguistic strategies at micro-level is related to macro-level societal problems like injustice and xenophobia. However, theoretical and practical knowledge of press and politics may not be always sufficiently considered in these works.

A difficulty arising from engaging with a multidisciplinary literature is that I need to find my way around the plurality of concepts, approaches, taxonomies, and key words. Authors operating within different disciplines and research traditions may use various discipline-specific or school-specific 'labels' to refer to similar phenomena. And vice versa: identical or very similar terms could be used to refer to different phenomena. One of such concepts, I should warn the reader at the outset already, is 'strategy'. When discourse analysts use this term, they usually mean 'discursive strategies': more or less planned or conventionalised ways of using language to achieve certain goals in

particular contexts (see, e.g., Culpeper, 2015). In political science literature, the term 'strategy' often refers to calculated choices that are extra-linguistic, such as structuring an organisational hierarchy or arranging the administrative workflow in a particular goal-oriented manner (see, e.g., Hood, 2011). In this thesis, I use the term 'strategies of blame avoidance' to encompass a broad range of practices (including linguistic ones) that characterise blame avoiding behaviour. When I refer to 'discursive strategies of blame avoidance', it means that I zoom in to the uses of specific linguistic or semiotic resources for the purpose of self-defence against blame.

A similar word of caution is due with respect to the use of the term 'discourse'. Many authors use it simply to refer to a text, conversation, or debate. However, I follow the tradition of the discourse-historical studies, where *discourse* is defined as a complex analytical construct:

> a cluster of context-dependent semiotic practices that are situated within specific fields of social action, socially constituted and socially constitutive, related to a macro-topic, [and] linked to the argumentation about validity claims such as truth and normative validity involving several social actors who have different points of view. (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 89)

Hence, discourses about blame are always related to specific topics (e.g., harmful events, norm violations), there are always multiple perspectives involved (e.g., contradicting views of blame makers and blame takers), and they are always argumentative (e.g., claims about someone's blameworthiness or otherwise can be proved or disproved). Discourses are realised as *texts*, each of which can be categorised under a *genre*, that is, a "socially ratified way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 14). For example, genres used by government communicators include news releases, opinion pieces in newspapers, social media postings, policy documents, televised speeches, broadcast interviews, and so forth.

One more early warning regarding terminology: I am reluctant to use the term 'responsibility' in this study. This term is frequently used in literature on blame phenomena, but it has many meanings (see, e.g., Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Goffman, 2010, p. 99), and is more likely to blur rather than clarify the focus of my research. My thesis is about blame avoidance, which may involve manipulating the

perception of what a government or an officeholder *can* do (i.e., their capacity) and *should* do (i.e., their obligations). The term 'responsibility' is a hypernym: it tends to be used so that it subsumes both of these meanings. In a similar vein, I generally avoid using the term 'accountability', which in political science is also used to mean different things, such as a virtuous behaviour or an institutional mechanism of making governments responsive to publics.[5]

Interpretivist presuppositions

In this research project, I draw on *constructivist–interpretivist presuppositions* (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Yanow, 2007). This means, above all, that the argument presented in this study "rests on a belief in the existence of (potentially) multiple, intersubjectively constructed 'truths' about social, political, cultural, and other human events" (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012, p. 4). The primary task of a researcher, as I see it, is to try to understand (e.g., by consulting various theories and gathering new empirical data via fieldwork) the many perspectives people have on the social phenomena under investigation. Hence this study is concerned with meaning making (rather than hypothesis testing) and contextuality (rather than generalisability), and does not presume that the behaviour of human actors involved in blame games is always 'rational' (unlike the studies based on game theory and rational choice theory that explicitly rely on the rationality of the 'players', e.g., Anand, 1998). I am not seeking to construct a formal model of strategic interaction between blame makers and blame takers. Indeed, formal modelling may be questionable, not least because the participant roles in blame games are not stable: blame makers may become blame takers and vice versa (Hood, 2014). What I hope to achieve in this thesis is a broader interpretive understanding (v*erstehen* rather than *erklären*) of the plurality of meanings attached to discursive blame avoidance behaviour.

Interpretive researchers should be self-reflective and explicit about how their own perspectives might influence the research process (Altheide & Johnson, 2011).

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[5] For a review of the various uses of 'accountability' as a complex concept, and the difficulties of substantially defining it, see Bovens (2010) and Pollitt & Hupe (2011). Interestingly, Hood (2014) suggests that if we take 'accountability' to mean 'answerability' (e.g., as explaining and diagnosing problems rather than establishing someone's culpability), it has much in common with 'blame avoidance' conceptualised as a practice.

Therefore, in the following points, I would like to further clarify the scope of my study, as well as my stance and interests as a researcher.[7]

- I assume that the practices of government communication in modern democratic societies[8] are influenced, inter alia, by (a) the inclination of officeholders to avoid blame; and (b) 'government meta-communication', that is, the manifold ways government insiders talk and write about government communication (e.g., in their communication guidelines and at their professional training events). This assumption is largely based on my own previous work experience in news journalism and civil service.

- I focus on executive government communication activities directed at the general public at the national level. Accordingly, my research is not about diplomacy, international communication between states, intergovernmental communication between central, regional, and local governments, or intragovernmental communication between various branches and departments of government. I am not studying communication in or on behalf of legislatures (parliaments). Neither is my research about political parties and their campaign communication. The latter has been the most common research focus taken up by numerous scholars in the field of political communication.

- I wish to gain a deeper understanding of the (discursive) behaviour of government officeholders. Within the limits of my thesis, I do not intend to study the practices of media professionals or citizens (government outsiders) in considerable detail. However, I will refer to some previous studies that deal with certain practices and attitudes of media professionals and critical citizens in relation to public officeholders and governments.

- My interest lies in linguistic, rhetorical, social, and political aspects of human communication. My research is not about information and communication technologies or software used by governments to store, retrieve, transmit, and process data. In this study, I pay particular attention to textual forms of

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[7] Admittedly, the following points serve as a kind of 'disclaimer' – a statement designed to ward off unwanted claims and complaints by explicitly delimiting one's obligations – which is a well-known discursive genre of anticipative blame avoidance used by the providers of various goods and services.
[8] Modern democracies are countries and territories that enjoy a wide range of political rights (including free and fair elections) as well as civil liberties (including freedoms of expression, assembly, association, education, and religion). According to Freedom House (2015), 89 out of the world's 195 polities were characterised by high levels of such rights and liberties in 2014.

meaning making. Detailed analysis of gestures, sounds, and phonological aspects of defensive government communication could be addressed in future studies. However, I touch upon some tools for multimodal analysis of blame avoidance behaviour as a performance in Chapter 7.

- I am interested in how government officeholders try to hold on to their offices. Hence, I am not focusing, for example, on full apologies and resignations in this study. Delivering a full apology and resigning from office constitutes accepting rather than avoiding blame. Moreover, (political) apologia have already been studied in much previous research (Harris, Grainger, & Mullany, 2006; Kampf, 2008, 2009, 2011).

- Within my treatment of blame avoidance, I want to avoid taking a stance of an indiscreet blame maker. There is no place in my thesis for labelling any government insiders, taken either individually or as a group, as essentially 'good' or 'bad'. Neither do I want to make overly hasty assessments of the content of the particular policies that the political actors defend or attack in the texts that I analyse. I do not see my study as being about 'spin doctoring', 'political marketing', 'political branding', 'propaganda', or 'public relations' in general. While I explore persuasive communication practices of executive government, I do not essentially presume that all these practices should be attached to these (possibly derogatory) labels or dealt with only within research traditions that tend to apply such labels.

- I do not regard blame avoidance as an essentially 'bad' practice in government. Avoiding risks – including blame risks – is an extremely common, ubiquitous aspect of human behaviour. Indeed, having a sense of what kind of behaviour may be seen as blameworthy can encourage us to avoid transgressing moral norms and causing harm to others in the first place. In political life, the compulsion to avoid blame can sometimes feed into a fruitful public debate over possible merits and disadvantages of holding certain beliefs or behaving in certain ways. However, it is worth stressing here that I *do not* intend to give advice to government officeholders (or anyone, for that matter) on 'how to better deflect blame'.

- I do not regard having 'less defensive language use' or 'better communication' as a cure for all the problems of modern democracy. However, I strongly

believe that greater alertness towards specific instances of strategic blame avoidance, coupled with a more nuanced understanding of the possible effects of the different discursive strategies adopted by government officeholders, would help citizens become more discerning in their judgements of political text and talk.

1.2 Implications of this study for democratic deliberation

I launch this both theoretical and applied research project with a broader societal aim in mind. By drawing attention to the possible ill effects of defensive government communication for government outsiders, I hope to contribute to increasing critical language awareness and improving democratic deliberation in the public sphere.

In representative democracies, a precondition for holding government insiders answerable to the public is that citizens approach political leadership with reflective scepticism, develop critical thinking skills, and are capable of engaging in open and uninhibited dialogue with powerful policy makers, thereby fostering mutual understanding. Some discursive strategies of blame avoidance, however, are designed to shut out any scepticism, derail or block a debate over a blame issue, and thus prevent social learning. Officeholders may try to impair or bias their audience's understanding of information, make extensive use of discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients (e.g., threats, discursive group polarisation, scapegoating), and hurt the interests of less powerful groups in society.

Application of such strategies may have consequences that can be regarded as 'undesirable' from normative points of view that idealise the Habermasian concept of public sphere or other forms of mutually respectful and unhindered interaction between people. Thus, the 'blame avoidance angle' that I adopt in my study of government communication can be seen as having a rather firm normative footing in the Critical Theory (as does the discourse-historical approach to analysing social problems that guides my study; see Forchtner, 2011). From this critical perspective, officeholders' systematic practices of blame avoidance may in certain instances lead

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to the production of text and talk that can be evaluated as manipulative – and hence as barriers to deliberative political life.[9]

By conducting this research, I hope to deepen critical citizens' understanding of where, when, how, and why defensive uses of text, talk, and images by government officeholders may amount to discursive manipulation. As a result, researchers will have new analytical tools to advance scholarly understanding of the linguistic aspects of blame avoidance, and government outsiders will improve their ability to cut though officeholders' possibly misleading defensive text and talk.

1.3 Research questions

RQ: How to identify and interpret discursive blame avoidance in government communication?

RQ 1: How to conceptualise and operationalise 'discursive blame avoidance' in government?

RQ 2: How to identify and interpret reactive discursive blame avoidance in the frontstage of government communication, i.e., in public (mediated) responses to public accusations?

RQ 3: How to identify and interpret anticipative discursive blame avoidance in the backstage of government communication?

1.4 Data

My research questions imply that I should seek empirical evidence of government communicators using certain discursive resources to avoid blame. Admittedly, it is not easy to pinpoint exactly what kind of data and how much of it might be necessary for this project. Hypothetically, one option would be to compile an extensive data set, a large corpus of government-produced public text and talk, possibly representing a variety of countries, time periods, and types of government, and then try to 'extract'

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[9] I will expand on the notion of 'manipulation' with regard to blame avoidance in Chapter 4. For multiple conceptualisations of the term, see also de Saussure & Schulz (2005), van Dijk (2006), and Chilton (2011). For a concise take on deliberative politics, see Habermas (1996).

each and every instance of discursive blame avoidance from this corpus. This, however, seems impracticable at this stage, because there are no existing comprehensive frameworks available for identifying and comparing various ways of avoiding blame *specifically in government communication* in terms of linguistic (or semiotic) features. Therefore, I need to design my research project as an *exploratory study* that would contribute to filling this gap in knowledge. In terms of the methodological stages of discourse-historical studies, my project would hence qualify as a 'qualitative pilot analysis', aiming at formulating and testing analytic categories and first assumptions based on a relatively small range of data (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; see also Appendix A).

Moreover, as I will explain in Chapter 3, 'avoiding blame' is not a linguistic category and cannot be always spotted simply by looking at a given text; rather, it involves strategic ways of exploiting shared knowledge (e.g., about the likelihood of certain outcomes attracting blame) in particular situational, institutional, and historical contexts. Therefore, my data selection is guided by non-linguistic contextual knowledge of when, where, how, and why government officeholders might engage in defensive behaviour. A useful source of general knowledge of typical defensive situations and moves in government is the political science literature on blame avoidance (e.g., Hood, 2011).

The existing literature suggests that blame avoidance behaviour is more salient during the periods of economic turmoil when governments are forced to engage in more 'loss-allocating activities' (Weaver, 1986). Hence I have decided to narrow down the temporal scope of data collection and focus my exploratory study on government communication during and in the aftermath of the most recent major (global or North-Atlantic) financial crisis that emerged in 2007–2008 in the United States and affected many countries over the following years.

For an exploratory study, it is also reasonable to narrow down spatial/institutional scope and focus on communication activities of a specific government, making it possible to pay sufficient attention to the specific contexts of the officeholders' defensive behaviour. I have chosen to draw my data from the UK government during the years 2008–2015. There are three main reasons for making that choice.

First, the UK was deeply affected by the financial crisis of the late 2000s. The first signs of crisis emerged in the UK in 2007 during the rule of the Labour government, became a central issue of the 2010 general election campaign, and continued to influence the political debates and actions during the rule of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government from 2010 to 2015. The coalition government introduced policies, such as cuts to the welfare budget, which typically prompt the government to engage increasingly in blame avoidance behaviour (Weaver, 1986; Pal & Weaver, 2003). The fiscal stress had also a direct effect on the organisation of British government communication: It provided the rationale for the coalition government's decision to restructure the apparatus of the UK government communication, to freeze and cut its communication expenditure, and to declare 'efficiency' a central value that should guide the work of government communicators (Sanders, 2013). Hence the professional (non-elected) government communicators employed in the British Civil Service also found themselves in a new situation where their instinct of self-preservation was presumably more manifest.

Second, the UK has an exceptionally long and relatively well studied tradition of official government communication: It dates back to mid-19th century and has been addressed by several academic research projects as well as official investigations (e.g., Franklin, 1994; Gregory, 2012; Phillis, 2004; Sanders, 2013). Hence, by focusing on the UK, I have access to a useful body of relevant historical and institutional background information about its government communication, which helps me to contextualise my study and guide my data selection.

Third, the UK government has made the announcements of the Cabinet Office and all the ministerial departments, as well as the transcripts of ministerial press conferences, accessible and searchable online, thus facilitating the collecting of samples of this type of data on public communication for the purpose of my research project. Moreover, the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government that came to power in the UK in 2010 lent itself for exploratory study as it made some of its communication guidelines publicly available (Cabinet Office, 2012, 2013, 2014), granted me access to one of their major professional training events for government communicators in 2014, and provided an opportunity to conduct a research interview with a senior British government communicator.

Therefore, my decision to place government communication in the UK at the centre of this exploratory study is primarily justified by the combination of two factors: the salience of the financial crisis (and hence of the government blame games) in the UK, and the accessibility of a range of data about British government communication that could be subjected to discourse-historical analysis of blame avoidance behaviour.

To answer RQ 2, I need to study specific moments when officeholders engage in reactive blame avoidance in the frontstage of government communication. I limit my exploratory study to certain communicative genres that top officeholders use to provide public responses to public accusations: defending government's actions in an opinion article in face of blame attacks from the opposition, issuing an official response to a public accusation, performing a public apology after receiving blame, and responding to a blame-implicating question of a journalist. Admittedly, this selection of genres of responding to accusations is not comprehensive: other genres can be studied in future research.

For the purposes of this thesis, I first collected and examined textual samples of each genre based on the selection criteria described below, and then, for detailed exemplary analyses, selected concrete texts that were related to particular extraordinary conflictual events and blame risks that seemed most likely to provoke defensive reactions from government officeholders.

- To understand the blame game in opinion articles, I examined the opinion pieces published by the UK Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition in the British broadsheet newspapers with the largest circulation figures (*The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *Financial Times*, and *The Guardian*) throughout the outset of the financial crisis in 2007–2008 (5 in total). For a detailed example analysis, I chose one of these that came out at a time when the financial crisis in the UK became most acute: the Prime Minister Gordon Brown's article titled "We Must Lead the World to Financial Stability" that he published in *The Times* after his government had announced an unprecedented plan to support the banking sector with up to an aggregate total of £500 billion in loans and guarantees on 8 October 2008. In addition, to contextualise the blame-avoiding moves in the Prime Minister's article as a part of the long-standing opposition–government blame game over the causes of the crisis (see

Chapter 5), I decided to carry out a similar detailed analysis of an opinion article published in *The Sunday Telegraph* by David Cameron, the then opposition leader, after the first 'materialising' of the emerging financial crisis in the UK: the collapse of Northern Rock, a British bank, on 17 September 2007. Doing so allows me to reconstruct the interplay between the opposition leader's offensive discursive moves (blame making) and the Prime Minister's defensive moves (blame avoiding), and to juxtapose their competing narratives about the causes of (and solutions to) the crisis.

- To understand blame avoidance in official responses to public accusations, I examined the announcements of the coalition government between 2010 and 2015 on its official website (www.gov.uk), focusing on announcements marked as 'government responses' on the topic of 'government efficiency, transparency and accountability' (9 in total). For an example analysis, I chose a response published in response to an investigative story on government overspending in *The Times* on 9 January 2012. The story, entitled 'Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure' was a significant blame attack by a major broadsheet newspaper on the government on an issue that was at the time at the core of its programme: introducing cuts to the UK budget. This provoked the Cabinet Office to issue a carefully crafted defensive response.

- To see how public apologising could be interpreted as a defensive move, I analysed a political apology that was arguably the most prominent of its kind delivered during the rule of the coalition government between 2010 and 2015: the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's apology for not keeping his party's pre-2010 election promise to oppose increasing university tuition fees. This rather exceptional statement was published on *YouTube* on 19 September 2012, and aired on television in the UK later that month. Public discussions over this move dominated the media agenda for several following weeks.

- To find examples of government officeholders responding to blame-implicating questions of a journalist, I examined the transcripts of the press conferences given by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister between 2010 and 2015 (4 in total), and chose to focus my example analysis on a widely covered press conference on 7 January 2013 where David Cameron and Nick Clegg presented the first ever 'mid-term review' – an important self-assessment document of the government. The press conference

was as a major proactive attempt at positive self-presentation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, but the participating journalists used this as an opportunity to throw some hard-hitting questions at the presenters, thereby triggering defensive responses from the two top officeholders.

To answer RQ 3, I need to study anticipative discursive blame avoidance behaviour – defensive action that does not take the form of messages directed at the general public but remains mainly in the backstage of government. It is admittedly very difficult to gain full access to the backstage of government communication to observe, as a researcher, every aspect of officeholders' behaviour. Hence my data collection was guided primarily by accessibility. In the course of my research, I was able to scrutinise the recently published professional guidelines of UK government communicators, observe a major training event of UK government communicators, and carry out an interview with a top UK government communicator who had been involved in preparing the guidelines and the training programme. When collecting this data, I focused on the representations of problematic aspects of government communication that could attract blame (see Chapters 2, 6 and 7), and, for a closer analysis in terms of anticipative blame avoidance strategies, selected certain textual and semiotic examples that seemed to be particularly defensive.

I examined five operational guidelines that were made available on the website of the Government Communication Service between 2010 and 2015 to find evidence of 'defensiveness'. The existing literature suggests that the relationship between professional government communicators and ministers is problematic, has attracted a lot of criticism (see, e.g., Franklin, 1994), and thus might elicit anticipative blame avoidance. Therefore, for a detailed example analysis, I selected the most recent document that specifically dealt with describing and 'regulating' this relationship: *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* (see Chapter 6).

In addition, I was able to attend and take field notes at the largest professional training event of UK government communicators in June 2014, and arrange an interview with a top UK government communication professional in April 2015. These personal encounters allowed me to gain a better grasp of the officeholders' views on what kind of blame they might anticipate and how it should be dealt with.

In sum, I have collected four kinds of empirical data that represents a range of linguistic and performative realisations of blame avoidance for analysis: textual data from frontstage rhetorical performances and written announcements of the UK government officeholders, textual data from operational guidelines aimed mainly at government communication professionals, field notes from a participant observation of a communication training event in the backstage of government, and an interview with a high-ranking government insider. Hence, for this research project I have engaged with an *unusual and unique set of empirical data* which allows me to shed new light on some of the reactive and anticipative defensive communication practices of the British government, and thereby improve our understanding of how to identify and interpret discursive blame avoidance in government communication.

A final note – a disclaimer, if you will – about data. As this is an exploratory project with a focus on developing analytic tools for detailed interpretations of concrete instances of defensive language use, my study is neither quantitative nor comparative. I am not going to make any strong claims about the frequency or prevalence of the use of the discursive strategies that I refer to in my analysis. I do not claim that all the insights that I draw from my data could be readily universalised across other countries or governments. All the examples I present should be seen as situated within specific historical, socio-political, and institutional contexts. I do not use experiments, tests or polls to 'measure' the possible effects of blame avoidance strategies to particular audiences. I do not attempt to explain similarities and differences in blame avoidance practices across time, type of government, country, and so forth. Moreover, while I draw my data from the British government communication in the aftermath of the financial crisis of late 2000s, my study is not about the causes and the broader social, political, and economic implications of that crisis. There are many other works that specifically focus on diagnosing the symptoms of this crisis, discussing the actions of various actors in response to these symptoms, and placing the crisis in a broader historical and theoretical context (see Benner, 2013; Davies, 2010; Hay, 2010, 2013; Jessop, 2015, among many others). I will, however, necessarily take note of some of the conflicting causal stories about the crisis, as these form a salient backdrop to the blame avoiding behaviour that I explore in my thesis.

1.5 Overview of the thesis

In *Chapter 2*, I review the conceptualisations of government communication in academic literature. From the perspective of blame avoidance, I delineate four distinctive approaches: Government communication can be understood as a policy instrument, as a commodity, as self-serving manipulation by powerful officeholders, or as a factor that either facilitates or inhibits democracy. Each of these conceptualisations provides a different perspective from which to identify and interpret blame avoidance in government communication (RQ 1).

In *Chapter 3*, I introduce blame avoidance as the central concept of this study. As the study of blame avoidance in government is essentially a study of 'blame games' between various (potential) blame makers and (self-preserving) officeholders, I sketch out a general methodological 'scaffolding' for a discursive analysis of government blame games, and try to outline the components of the blame game conceived of as particular kind of language game (RQ 1).

In *Chapter 4*, I operationalise blame avoidance in government communication for the purposes of discursive analysis (RQ 1). I engage with a variety of textual examples of reactive blame avoidance in my UK government communication data set (RQ 2), consult the existing literature on defensive (linguistic) behaviour, and propose a framework for pinning down and interpreting defensive discursive strategies that government officeholders employ in contexts of perceived blame risk.

In *Chapter 5*, I further explore how to interpret reactive blame avoidance (RQ 2) by focusing, in particular, on the opposition–government blame game. I deconstruct in detail some of the discursive strategies that the opposition used to attribute blame and the government used to deflect blame during the outset of a financial crisis in the UK in 2007–2008. I analyse the opinion articles in broadsheet newspapers, written by the then Leader of the Opposition David Cameron and the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown, sketch out an argument model of the blame game, and evaluate the usefulness of using argument models for identifying and interpreting discursive practices of blame avoidance.

In *Chapter 6*, I shift my attention to anticipative blame avoidance in government communication (RQ 3). I show how written professional guidelines for government

communicators could be subjected to a discourse-historical inquiry and interpreted as complex discursive devices of deflecting and diffusing blame. I outline historically and institutionally situated issues of blame that inform the occupational habitus of government communicators in the UK. I analyse concrete examples from the propriety guidelines of the UK government communicators and demonstrate how the use of certain discursive strategies could limit the possible perceived blameworthiness of officeholders when they breach the border of propriety.

In *Chapter 7*, I look further at anticipative blame avoidance in the backstage of government communication (RQ 3). I analyse the data gathered during a participant observation of the Public Sector Communications Academy, a major official training event organised by the UK Government Communication Service in Manchester in June 2014. I work towards developing a systematic approach to interpreting certain performative and multimodal aspects of personal and institutional blame avoidance in government.

In *Chapter 8*, I provide a recap on my overall conceptual framework for identifying and interpreting discursive blame avoidance in government communication. I discuss the implications of my empirical findings as well as my theoretical and methodological contributions to the study of government communication and blame games. I reassert the importance of sophisticated, context-sensitive analysis of blame phenomena in political life, and make suggestions for future research.

2. Four conceptualisations of government communication

In recent years, some scholars have attempted to define and map government communication as a distinctive field of research (Canel & Sanders, 2013; Garnett, 2004; Howlett, 2009; Lee, Neeley & Stewart, 2012; Liu & Horsley, 2007; Strömbäck & Kiousis, 2011). The authors of these works tend to approach government communication from a narrowly functionalist perspective, their discussion is often confined to instrumental rationality, and they use language that is characteristic to managerial disciplines, such as public relations, marketing, and public policy. For example, Canel and Sanders (2013) claim to "capture the full range of the possibilities of government communication" by looking at "the *role*, *practice*, *aims* and *achievements* of communication" (p. 4) carried out in and by executive government agencies. What catches my eye in this definition, above all, is the unproblematised and unqualified use of the word 'achievements' – a term that implies success (for whom?) and effectively shifts researchers' attention away from phenomena that could be regarded as possible (if not frequent) *failures* of administrative communication. Due to such 'optimism bias', much of the current theorising under the 'government communication' rubric has remained one-sided.

In this chapter, my goal is to widen the theoretical map of government communication research so that both the various and often conflicting notions of 'success' and 'failure' in the field could be put into conversation. I work towards building a heuristic framework for understanding major differences and similarities between current approaches to government communication by outlining and juxtaposing distinctive ways of legitimising (i.e., defending) and delegitimising (i.e., blaming) government communication as a social practice in scholarly literature. To achieve this, I start off by teasing out major distinctions between patterns of text and talk about government communication (i.e., metadiscourses) in relation to blame and blame avoidance.

Blame as a concept as well as its social uses have attracted a lot of academic attention (Coates & Tognazzini, 2013a; Douglas, 1992; Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; McKenna, 2012; Scanlon, 2008; Sher, 2006; Tilly, 2008; Wodak, 2006a) and many scholars seem to agree that "an organisation is defined by how it handles blame and punishment" (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2007, p. 131). Within political organisations, people's compulsion to avoid receiving blame from others has been conceptualised as

an essential policy motivator (Weaver, 1986) and as a "political and bureaucratic imperative" (Hood, 2011, p. 24) that helps us make sense of officeholders' behaviour. Unsurprisingly, nearly all scholarly treatments of government communication contain some instances of what I call *lexis of blame/avoidance*, that is, words and phrases which more or less explicitly refer to potentially blameworthy phenomena (e.g., problem, issue, risk, conflict, challenge, failure) or indicate officeholders' general concern about avoiding blame (e.g., reputation, image, integrity, propriety). This has inspired me to look more systematically *through the lens of blame/avoidance strategies* at how government and its communication activities have been written about within a broad range of academic literature.

What do I mean when I talk about applying the lens of blame/avoidance strategies to my literature review? Blame games between (groups of) people involve at least two sets of players: blame makers and blame takers (Hood, 2011). *Blame makers* engage in performances designed to attribute causal agency to someone for bringing about something negative. *Blame takers,* on the other hand, usually try to avoid, deflect, or diffuse such attributions for a (potentially) negative event or outcome. My 'lenses' in this study are focused on how such player positions are constructed in texts, how the 'moves' of players in a particular blame game are described and evaluated, and how particular phenomena are presented as either warranting blame (e.g., failure, harm, wrongdoing, transgression) or not (e.g., solution, natural, ethical, justified).

Government insiders – officeholders and public service providers at all institutional levels – often find themselves in the role of a blame taker. They may have multiple personal reasons to be concerned with the risk of being regarded as blameworthy.

> Elected politicians will care about blame if they think it will reduce their chances of re-election. Managers will care about blame if they think it will reduce their prospects of promotion, bonuses, staying in their current jobs, or moving on to better ones. Professionals will care about blame if they think it will diminish their reputations in ways that could damage their careers or produce expensive lawsuits over malpractice. Front-line bureaucrats will care about blame if they think it will cost them their jobs or their bonuses or their chances of promotion, or bust them back down to the ranks. (Hood, 2011, pp. 7–8)

People outside of the government – users of public services, voters, journalists, opposition commentators, activist groups, and so forth – are more commonly seen as blame makers who may have various motives to attribute responsibility for bad phenomena to the government. (However, some of the 'outsiders' may, at times, find themselves also receiving blame from the government, for instance, when officials blame the news media for 'biased coverage'.)

Why is this basic insider–outsider distinction relevant here? It is because when we look through the lens of blame/avoidance at how scholars write about government and its communication activities (*government/communication*), we notice that each author more or less explicitly takes sides with either blame takers or blame makers. While writers may differ in their specific choice of a perspective and their apparent knowledge interests, there seem to be two mutually antagonistic broad 'streams' of literature that can be delineated.

On the one hand, there are authors who write about government/communication mainly from a perspective of a powerful government officeholder or an executive institution, and are thus more interested in the *practical art (or science) of governing* and maintaining control. From this perspective, receiving blame may lead to losing power and therefore blame avoidance – including defensive use of language – may be seen as an important skill or craft. This kind of approach belongs to what I call the stream of '*administrative*' literature.

On the other hand, there are scholars who generally empathise with 'government outsiders', often much less powerful individuals and groups (e.g., 'people in the street'), and are rather concerned with helping them to *avoid being governed* in particular ways. From that perspective, dishing out blame to the government or a particular officeholder may appear as a necessary practice of the 'art of criticism' that helps to keep (potential) abuses of political power at bay. Moreover, the competitive struggle between adversaries in political blame games (agonism) could be seen by some as the very essence of democracy. This kind of works I regard as belonging to the broad stream of '*critical*' literature.

The idea of distinguishing analytically between 'administrative' approaches to communication on the one hand, and 'critical' approaches on the other, is of course not new. This basic distinction was postulated in a seminal essay about

communication research by the Austrian-American sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld already in 1941. This dual division is also in line with the main research traditions of social structures (see, e.g., Swedberg, 2005) as well as the categorisation of organisational theories into 'instrumental' and 'institutional' as devised by Christensen, Lægreid, Roness, and Røvik (2007).

Furthermore, it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to trace the roots of these approaches back to certain broader *historical strands of social and political thought*, in a way following the basic macro-level distinction – 'functionalist' versus 'conflict' theoretical approaches – made in much social theory (Giddens, 2009). I thus presume that every current text about government/communication reflects distinctive historically sedimented sets of normative ideas about political life that its producers subscribe to. For instance, we notice major differences when we stay alert to what kind of metaphors certain authors choose to use. Do they talk, for example, of a society as a 'body' capable of self-regulation, or as a 'structure' with upper and lower 'layers'? Do they regard executive government as a 'protector' of individual liberties, a 'provider' of services and welfare, or an 'oppressor' of certain social groups? Is public communication by the authorities seen as useful 'cultivation' of civic virtues in free individuals, and maintenance of social consensus and stability, or as self-serving manipulation of the perceptions, beliefs, and values of the unsuspecting 'masses'? [11]

Accordingly, in my view, theorising government communication primarily involves constructing *heuristic devices* – models or outlines of ideal types – that would help researchers notice and compare competing *metadiscourses* – alternative patterns of writing and talking about government communication. These metadiscourses are *historically embedded* and characterised by distinctive *metadiscursive vocabularies and strategies* (e.g., particular ways of naming, describing, arguing, and positioning) that express certain belief systems. In linguistic terms, the application of the lens of blame/avoidance means that I analyse metadiscourses about government/communication to explicate how discursive strategies of perspectivation,

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[11] *Metaphor* can be understood as "the phenomenon whereby we talk and, potentially, think about something in terms of something else" (Semino, 2008, p. 1). Some metaphors may establish correspondences across different conceptual domains. For example, if we talk about politics in terms of a battle, then our knowledge about politics (as a 'target' domain) is partly structured in terms our knowledge about battles (as a 'source' domain). For a good overview of the use of societal metaphors in social sciences, see Urry (2000, Ch. 2).

nomination, predication, and argumentation are used to maintain and/or modify particular power relations between certain social actors.[12]

Such a more detailed analysis of existing literature exposes four distinct ways of conceptualising government communication, based on how authors represent and evaluate the government blame game.

1. Within administrative literature, some authors regard blaming the government as a fundamentally negative occurrence, perhaps even as a major threat to the functioning of the society as a whole because receiving blame erodes the perceived authority of the government and thereby curbs its capability to carry out its plans. From this point of view, government communication is seen mainly as a *policy instrument* – a useful tool for asserting control.

2. Other scholars within the administrative stream write about blame attributions to the government as if these were unfortunate signs of customer dissatisfaction – certain individuals not being happy with (some aspect of) some government-provided service. From this perspective, government communication is treated as a *commodity*.

3. Within critical literature, some authors treat blaming the government as a crucial task of oppressed and disadvantaged people, because they see it as perhaps the only way to remain resilient in the face of the many inevitable power abuses committed by the government. From this point of view, government communication is seen as essentially devious *manipulation* of public perceptions and behaviour.

4. Many critical researchers take a more ambivalent stance towards government blame games. They regard blaming and blame avoidance as fundamental social processes by which people make meanings, construct identities, and regulate power relations (through agonistic struggle) both within and between groups and organisations. Blame can be used both to advance and hamper participation and deliberation in society. From this perspective, government communication can be seen as either *doing or undoing democracy*.

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[12] I will explain these discursive strategies further in Chapter 3. For a more detailed discussion and examples, see also Reisigl and Wodak (2001, 2009), and Wodak (2011).

In the rest of this chapter, I will describe some pertinent characteristics of each of these four ways of talking about government/communication in turn, and bring concrete examples from literature to illustrate how the authors' stances towards blame/avoidance indicate significant differences between these conceptualisations.

2.1 Government communication as a policy instrument

My first example comes from an edited volume titled *Carrots, Sticks, and Sermons: Policy Instruments and Their Evaluation* by Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, and Vedung (2003). The authors use 'sticks', 'carrots', and 'sermons' as metaphors when writing about three general categories of public policy instruments: regulation (issuing orders that people are obliged to follow), economic means (giving or removing material resources, e.g., subsidies), and information (issuing voluntary appeals). They define policy instruments as "the set of techniques by which governmental authorities wield their power in attempting to ensure support and effect or prevent social change" (Vedung, 2003, p. 21). Thus, communication (or 'information', 'exhortation', or 'moral suasion', to use the author's preferred terms) is represented as one of the three kinds of 'toolsets' or 'control models' that governments may choose to apply in their work, usually in some kind of a combination with other instruments.

People's support to government's policy choices and 'legitimacy' of particular policies is conceptualised in the book as follows:

> Legitimacy represents a political criterion which stresses that acceptance is
> crucial for actual effectiveness of a policy or program. It is then regarded as a
> '*conditio sine qua non*' for effectiveness; without it, the governee will look for
> behaviour alternative to the one prescribed or induced by government, and will
> thus frustrate the intended effects. (Bemelmans-Videc, 2003, p. 8)

What is evident from this quote is that 'effectiveness', defined as a situation where the 'governees' are behaving in the way the government has intended them to behave, is represented as the highest goal of the administration, for which public 'acceptance' is a precondition.

Admittedly, this precondition can be difficult to fulfil. Administrative agencies seem to be perpetually concerned about external challenges to their 'organisational

reputation' – namely, possible public accusations of wrongdoing that could undermine organisation's legitimacy. This tendency is well exemplified by the following assertion by Carpenter and Krause (2012):

> Naturally, public administrators confront three primary challenges that are fundamental to governance: (1) how to maintain broad-based support for an agency and its activities, (2) how to steer a vessel amid hazardous shoals (enemies and potentially disaffected supporters), and (3) how to project a judicious combination of consistency and flexibility. (p. 26)

The use of the 'organisation is a vessel' conceptual metaphor is perhaps most salient here. Top officeholders are depicted as 'captains' who hold the 'steering wheels' of their organisations and seem to be in full command of its crew and course. Organisation as a vessel on the sea is a closed container that exists and functions separately from other containers – that is, each government agency is represented as essentially 'sailing on its own'. And the 'enemies' of the organisation (whoever these are) are represented as dehumanised natural objects – shoals – that are often invisible but should be avoided at all costs. Government organisations are thus advised to remain constantly alert and capable of dodging potentially hidden external (blame) threats.

Much instructional literature for officeholders describes as problematic such circumstances where government encounters 'obstacles' like public distrust and disobedience, and becomes 'dysfunctional' in the sense that officeholders experience erosion of their control over public issues. On a personal or organisational micro-level, blame firestorms and scandals are feared as these may ruin individual or organisational reputation and result in the loss of power, finances, and job security for particular individuals (Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005). Government institutions are tempted to devise formal procedures which are designed to increase public trust in public administration. They talk, for instance, about the essential need for 'building relationships with publics', 'managing issues' and 'putting out fires' to avoid disruptions in the ideally stable functioning of administration.

While 'building relationships' may sound as a nice and safe activity to many, governments' instrumental uses of text and talk sometimes actually involve elements that most critics would call discursive violence. In the book *Carrots, Sticks, and*

Sermons (Bemelmans-Videc, Rist, & Vedung, 2003), there is a section describing the following particular communicative technique that governments may use to achieve 'acceptance' from a certain group of 'governees'.

> A very special tool in the information tool kit is *investigation and publicity.* One effect of an investigation – for instance, in the field of environmental policy – could be to push the management of an industrial plant, under the spur of public opinion, to make changes in, for instance, polluting practices, in advance of or without recourse to regular schemes. Effective as this means of control may be in some cases, certain drawbacks associated with it make it one to be used sparingly. It is inquisitorial and therefore less pleasant to use. (Vedung, 2003, p. 50)

This suggested technique – instrumental mobilisation of public blaming to increase obedience to authority – could be seen as touching the borderline of coercion: it involves 'pushing' certain people, placing them 'under the spur of public opinion', and, as the author himself admits, carrying out an unpleasant inquisition.

A reference to inquisition is actually very much to the point here if we think of the possible origins of the 'communication as a policy tool' conceptualisation. Administrative writings on government/communication may be seen as having their historical roots in the medieval instructional literature called 'mirrors for princes'. Such ruler's handbooks, famously exemplified by Niccolò Machiavelli's 16th century *Il Principe* (The Prince), provided monarchs with practical advice on their daily business of running a state, doing politics, being in control, and holding on to political power.

Il Principe contains several sections that deal in considerable detail with symbolic, communicative, and performative aspects of political leadership. The importance of such issues for the princes at the time is testified by Machiavelli's choice of titles for his chapters. These include, for example, 'Chapter 15 – Concerning things for which men, and especially princes, are praised or blamed', 'Chapter 19 – That one should avoid being despised and hated', 'Chapter 18 – Concerning the way in which princes should keep faith'. Perhaps most (in)famously, Machiavelli advises the princes to lie whenever it serves their purposes but simultaneously maintain an appearance of being truthful.

[A] wise lord cannot, nor ought he to, keep faith when such observance may be turned against him, and when the reasons that caused him to pledge it exist no longer. . . .But it is necessary to know well how to disguise this characteristic, and to be a great pretender and dissembler; and men are so simple, and so subject to present necessities, that he who seeks to deceive will always find someone who will allow himself to be deceived. (Machiavelli, 1513/2006, Ch. 18)

Going even further back in time, the oldest extant complete handbook on rhetoric, the 4th century BC Greek *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (Rhetoric to Alexander) in a rather similar vein presents pragmatic guidelines for a particular ruler, King Alexander. The anonymous author of the book coaches the king on how to persuade audiences by all means and with no particular regard to the benefit of any other than the speaker himself (Braet, 1996). As in the case of *Il Principe*, the author uses imperative language and takes the perspective of a ruler who seems to be constantly in need to defend himself against adversaries, including, amongst others, the 'common people'.

The common people are not as annoyed at being deprived of public offices as they are at being grievously abused. It is necessary to resolve differences among citizens as quickly as possible and not to delay or to have a mob from the countryside collect in the city. The common people gain strength from such meetings and overturn oligarchies. (Rhetoric to Alexander, 2011, p. 489)

Modern administrative treatments of government/communication have a lot in common with these centuries-old works. Their focus is still on advising the authorities on tackling the day-to-day tasks of governing. In terms of perspectivation, these works are generally written from the standpoint of the administrative system, the government as an organisation, its leaders, its officeholders, and thus from the perspective of the relatively more powerful groups and individuals: the elite of a society. And in a more or less explicit way they all show interest in the practicalities of exerting 'influence' on other groups and individuals, be it by coercion, handing out money, or the mastering of rhetoric as a political art of persuasion and motivation.

In searching answers to the central question of 'what works' in government, the authors of these instructional texts typically deal with organisational hierarchies ('structures', 'institutions', 'offices', 'agencies'), regulatory frameworks ('policies',

'legal acts', 'codes'), and processes ('planning', 'coordinating', 'monitoring', 'evaluating'). They draw upon and refer to various rules and regulations (e.g., the Official Secrets Act) and encourage the professionals to adopt particular strategies, tactics, and techniques (e.g., tips on media management). Some of the typical recurrent concepts that are used with a predominantly positive connotation in such literature are reminiscent of military language: 'strategic', 'tactical', 'operation', 'target', 'officer'.

Works in this tradition generally adhere to a functionalist presumption that the society should be characterised by social order, stability, and productivity. More specifically, these more or less explicitly idealise the state of play in which (a) the government as a system 'runs like clockwork' without facing any serious internal or external obstacles or disturbances like resistance, scandals, or crises; (b) citizens follow the goals and rules set by the government, because there is an acceptable level of obedience/consensus/trust in the government among the citizens; and (c) *de facto* acceptance of norms and the compatibility of expectations is sufficient to ensure coordination within the society and to guarantee governmental stability.

Accordingly, those individuals or groups who do not obey the rules are seen as deviants. There is a tendency to treat the (news) media as a deviant or an adversary if it is criticising the government, or as a helpful extension of the communication 'tool' if it is withholding criticism and helping to 'spread the government's message'.

The authors who talk about government communication as a commodity share some of the functionalist presumptions of the 'policy instrument' conceptualisation, but there are also significant differences.

2.2 Government communication as a commodity

To illustrate how government communication is conceptualised as a commodity, I will use as an example a journal article published in *Government Information Quarterly* by Gelders and Ihlen (2010). They write about government communication about potential policies in terms of a framework that is primarily used in business service marketing to improve 'service quality'. They conclude their analysis with the following practical suggestions for officeholders:

Customer satisfaction will only be achieved when the service meets the expected performance. Promotion of realistic expectations through performance communication will yield service validity (matching service expectations) and thus promote customer satisfaction . . . Politicians should learn from businesses to communicate less ambitious promises that are easier to reach. They should be inspired by the IKEA company, which announced that reorders of missing material will be sent within three weeks all the while knowing that it is normally sent within two . . . Such announcements can lead to more customer satisfaction than bold political promises. (Gelders & Ihlen, 2010, pp. 38–39)

What is striking here, above all, is the use of the word 'customers' (rather than 'governees' or 'citizens') to refer to groups of people outside of the government. In line with that, a particular communication technique of a private service company is presented as an idealised model or a benchmark that should be followed by the government to achieve the ultimate goal of 'customer satisfaction'. An emphasis is thus placed on governing and communicating according to the logic and values of the market.

Unlike within the 'policy instrument' literature, the market-centred way of conceptualising government/communication implies that people are not expected to be obedient to public authorities. Instead, people as 'customers' are expected to be self-interested and rational utility maximisers. This is perhaps best illustrated by an influential economic theory of political behaviour devised by an early public choice theorist Anthony Downs (1957). His calculus famously includes an assertion that rational individuals do not seek political information.

The government cannot coerce everyone to be well informed, because 'well-informedness' is hard to measure, because there is no agreed-upon rule for deciding how much information of what kinds each citizen 'should' have, and because the resulting interference in personal affairs would cause a loss of utility that would probab1y outweigh the gains to be had from a well-informed electorate. The most any democratic government has done to remedy this situation is to compel young people in schools to take courses in civics, government, and history. Consequently, it is rational for every individual to

minimise his investment in political information, in spite of the fact that most citizens might benefit substantially if the whole electorate were well informed. As a result, democratic political systems are bound to operate at less than maximum efficiency. (Downs, 1957, p. 148)

'Efficiency' is one of the main keywords characteristic of the 'commodity' approach to government/communication. This is in line with traditional management books that offer advice to managers of production companies on 'how to run a business', usually with a special focus on suggesting ways to transform organisations to increase their productivity and efficiency in a competitive environment. This may be achieved by increasing organisational 'competence', which is talked about in terms of, for example, 'leadership and management skills', 'training', 'innovation', and 'knowledge-intensive services'.

Some of the origins of this kind on literature lie in the development of scientific engineering of industrial workflows in the late 19th century USA. Taylor's (1911) *Principles of Scientific Management* – an influential handbook for managers – laid down many of its central themes. Taylor prescribed, for instance, rationality, logic, economic efficiency, empiricism, and standardisation within organisations. Importantly, these principles were seen to be applicable not only to the running of large manufacturing companies but to a whole variety of organisations, possibly including governments.

What does modelling public administration after profit-seeking businesses entail for government/communication? In a nutshell, the underlying behavioural script of the market-oriented view is that one should carry out research to identify particular segments of customers, understand their needs and develop products and services for them (in a competitive environment), which would hopefully result in customer satisfaction and loyalty. All of this is often supported by meticulously designed and tested advertising and brand communication. Accordingly, public communication is primarily regarded as a tool for attaining specific goals of organisations, usually related to selling more goods or services produced by the organisation ('marketing', 'promotion', 'publicity', 'advertising') and guaranteeing the survival and smooth functioning of the organisation via 'building goodwill' among people external to the organisation ('public relations', 'branding', 'reputation management', 'public affairs',

'corporate social responsibility'). Managers talk of 'investing' money in communication to attain certain business objectives. For example, a senior member of the UK government communication staff (G. C.) whom I interviewed for this research project, explained that government communicators in the UK are concerned about "making sure that we can demonstrate the government communications is delivering a good return on investment" (G. C., personal communication, April 28, 2015).

From this perspective, the (news) media professionals may be seen as taking on at least three different roles. Journalists and editors could be regarded as (1) customers who should be 'won over' so that they would show high levels of 'customer satisfaction, loyalty and goodwill' in relation to the government, (2) publicity agents who could be persuaded or hired to disseminate favourable messages about the government, and (3) competitors who should be outperformed in the race for the attention and the 'hearts' of particular audiences.

Organisational public relations practices that have been widely adopted by modern Western governments emerged in U.S. corporations in the early 20th century (Cutlip, 1994). An early seminal work in the field was Edward Bernays' (1928) book *Propaganda*, where he (in)famously argued that "the conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society" (p. 9). Therefore it is not surprising that some people see governments' communication activities primarily as full-on attempts to manipulate perceptions and behaviour of the people.

2.3 Government communication as manipulation

In an essay titled 'Lying in politics', Hannah Arendt (1973) warns her readers of "the commitment to nontruthfulness in politics … at the highest level of government" (p. 4). Her case in point is the U.S. government's propaganda activity surrounding the Vietnam War, but she is also making some universal claims about self-serving manipulative behaviour of top officeholders.

> Secrecy – what diplomatically is called "discretion", as well as the *arcana imperii*, the mysteries of government – and deception, the deliberate falsehood and the outright lie used as legitimate means to achieve political ends, have

been with us since the beginning of recorded history. Truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings. (Arendt, 1973, p. 4)

This quote reflects deep distrust in government/communication. Government is depicted as posing an inevitable threat to its 'governees' due to its permanent disposition to abuse its power and isolate outsiders by mystifying its action. This conceptualisation uses some of the language reminiscent of the 'policy instrument' approach ('means to achieve political ends', 'tools in political dealings') but the writer imbues these with negative connotation by associating these with lying as a sin.

Arendt (1973) specifically writes about the communication practices of the "public-relations managers in government", referring to these as the "more recent varieties" among "the many genres in the art of lying" (pp. 7–8).

> Public relations is but a variety of advertising; hence it has its origin in the consumer society, with its inordinate appetite for goods to be distributed through a market economy. The trouble with the mentality of the public-relations man is that he deals only in opinions and "good will", the readiness to buy, that is, in intangibles whose concrete reality is at a minimum. … The only limitation to what the public-relations man does comes when he discovers that the same people who perhaps can be "manipulated" to buy a certain kind of soap cannot be manipulated – though, of course, they can be forced by terror – to "buy" opinions and political views. (Arendt, 1973, p. 8)

This conceptualisation is in radical opposition with the 'commodity' approach to government communication. Arendt reminds her reader that a government 'outsider' should guard herself against both government communication as a policy instrument as well as a commodity.

This highly suspicious stance is also often taken towards the output of the (news) media. Schudson (2008) summarises neatly what he calls the prevailing 'lay understanding' of how press operates in Western democracies.[13] According to this

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[13] This understanding is also reflected in the 'propaganda model' of media as devised by Herman and Chomsky (1988).

understanding, the media is unable to provide citizens with adequate information about public affairs because

> (a) the government keeps information from the press or successfully manipulates the press into accepting its spin; (b) the corporate profit-oriented entities that gather most news are guided more by the economic advantages of sensation, sleaze, and the superficial than by efforts to inform the public; and (c) the professional journalists who work inside these corporate beasts and try to extract bits of truth from devious politicians are occupationally cautious, hobbled by in-group values of media elites, and motivated by professional advancement or driven by their own political views rather than by a passion to make democracy work. (Schudson, 2008, pp. 6–7)

A concern about people being oppressed by malicious discursive manipulation, government-perpetrated propaganda and 'spin-doctoring' is the hallmark of numerous critical works in philosophy, sociology, political science, history, linguistics, and communication studies (among many others, Altheide & Johnson, 1980; Corner, 2007; Gaber, 2000; Jowett & O'Donnell, 2006; Marlin, 2002; O'Shaughnessy, 2004; Taylor, 2003; van Dijk, 2006).

Propositions in critical academic writings about government communication as manipulation can be traced back to the premises laid out in Marxist conflict theory in the 19th century. Major influences include the Marxist notion of 'false consciousness', Gramscian conceptualisation of 'hegemony', and the critical tradition of the Frankfurt School that focuses on the often subtle cultural and psychological strategies that powerful groups use to limit the capacity for critical thought among the masses. One of the emblematic notions often used in critical works is, unsurprisingly, 'critique'. Critique may be defined as 'the art of not being governed quite so much' (Foucault, 1997, p. 29) and thus seen as a definite counterpoint to the goal of administrative literature, that is, mastering the practical art of governing. Many of these ideas are shared by the critical authors who write about practices of public communicators in terms of how these either restrict or advance democracy and social justice.

2.4 Government communication as a factor in (un)doing democracy

In an oft-cited article titled 'The Third Age of Political Communication', Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) list three ways how the current practices of mediatised government/communication pose problems to the deliberative processes of modern democracies.

- The danger of subordinating public policy to campaign imperatives and the immediate pressures of media demand. Most criteria for good policy-making include time for deliberation, causal analysis, examination of options, conduct of pilot studies, and perhaps even incremental decision making. … But it is clearly at odds with the media-driven school of 'instant response.'
- The doubtful relevance of much political communication to the substantive tasks of government and the substantive concerns of citizens. This arises ultimately from (a) politicians' involvement in image building and projection; (b) journalists' focus on process and dramatic incident, particularly scandals, internal party disputes, and politicians' mistakes; and (c) the struggle for tactical supremacy of both sides in their unceasing turf war.
- The related danger of fostering or reinforcing public indifference and skepticism because so much political communication seems too negative, too focused on infighting, too scripted, too repetitious, and lacking convincing credibility. (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, pp. 216–217)

The authors further alert us that "low trust in political communication may in turn exert a 'negative halo effect' over government attempts to inform people in specific policy areas (such as the environment, food safety, or the future of public services)" (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999, p. 217).

These quotes illustrate not only the authors' major concern about citizens' limited ability or will to participate in public policy making, but also a rather sophisticated understanding of blame issues in relation to government/communication. From this perspective, the government deserves blame if officeholders focus on 'non-substantive' activities like 'image building' and 'infighting' that do not address the concerns of the citizens. However, the blame for such behaviour is seen as shared between the government and the media: it is the complex interplay between the officeholders and the journalists that leads to the kind of dramatic struggle that lowers the overall public

trust in politics. The authors recognise that public communication on the part of the government is an integral component of policy-making and the provision of public services, but they are also critically aware of its manipulative tendencies (e.g., 'image making'). Government communication, therefore, could be seen as one of the factors in larger societal processes that either advance or limit public participation in political debates.

'Democratic deficit' (or 'political disenchantment') in contemporary societies is a standard theme of many critical studies in sociology, political science, and political communication studies (see, e.g., Hay, 2007; Coleman & Blumler, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009; Norris, 2011). Critical scholars generally suggest that the level of political control by the people in modern representative democracies is insufficient, citizens are growingly disaffected with their governments, and that certain communication practices of governments (among other factors) have led to these negative outcomes. From this perspective, governments should ideally observe high standards of integrity and commit themselves to certain criteria for ethical communication. Lack of integrity is, for these authors, one of the main warrants that justifies blaming the government.

Much of the critical discussion has been revolving around the Habermasian conception of the emergence of the 'public sphere' (*Öffentlichkeit*) and the normative theories of democracy, where communication is central. Many share Habermas' (1984, 1987, 2006) normative ideal of deliberation as a free, equal, rational argument of all parties affected, in an atmosphere of non-coercion. However, his critics like Fraser (1990), Benhabib (1992), and Mouffe (1999) stress, in a way or another, that because power imbalances between individuals and groups are inevitable, consensus cannot and should not be reached and thus people should "be open to other points of view in a process of continued contestation and deep respect for the adversary" (Wright, 2008, p. 32). So, in stark contrast to administrative perspectives, societal conflicts – including public blame firestorms – are not necessarily seen as negative but rather as having a "transformative potential" (Held, 1996, p. 241). Indeed, the practice of blaming the government when it 'does wrong' may be talked of as being worthy of praise: in the hope that such blaming has a "valuable educative and deterrent role" (Sher, 2006, p. 138).

What kind of transformation and education is sought? In searching answers to the question of 'who benefits at whose expense', the authors of critical texts often deal with the issues of power and knowledge in modern societies. A central thrust is educating and empowering the less powerful people by producing and disseminating "critical knowledge that enables human beings to emancipate themselves from forms of domination through self-reflection" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 7). This programme includes, for example, explicating the 'technologies of power' (Foucault, 1977), among which the sets of practices and strategies of government/communication may be seen as essentially belonging. Many critical authors focus on contesting ways of acting that construct and sustain inequalities based on gender, income, race, nationality, and so forth. They are opposed diametrically to functionalist and positivist scientists who, as they see it, usually disregard or downplay the sources of tension and inequality in society. Some recurrent concepts used in critical literature to warrant blame are 'domination', 'hegemony', 'inequality', 'exclusion', 'conflict', and 'crisis'. Blame is often deflected by references to 'equality', 'reflexivity', and 'social change'.

Modern critical approaches to government/communication may be seen as having more varied sources of origin besides the Marxist and Gramscian ideas that have been already mentioned above. First, Max Weber's early-20th century sociology provided an influential blueprint for analysing contradictions in modern societies. For example, he characterised bureaucracy as the most effective and efficient form of organisation, but also gave a critical warning that the mechanistic and impersonal application of rational rules would lead to a dehumanised society resembling an 'iron cage' (Weber, 1905/1958). Secondly, a major impetus came from the interpretive, linguistic, and cultural turns in social sciences in the second half of the 20th century. The beginning of this turn is usually associated with the publication of Wittgenstein's (1953) influential *Philosophical Investigations*. The turn to culture was driven by the rising prominence of social and cultural anthropology, and interpretive ethnography as a research method (e.g., Geertz, 1973; Goffman, 1969).

One realisation that is perhaps most characteristic to the linguistically oriented stream of critical scholarship is that communication can be used in political life both in ways that increase equality in society as well as in ways that isolate certain groups or individuals from the rest of the society. For example, political discourse analyst

Martin Reisigl (2008) defines political speeches as 'interactional contributions to identity politics' that function to

> accomplish the two political purposes of inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, they are socially integrative by contributing to the formation of transindividual identity and to the foundation of group solidarity. On the other hand, they can fulfil disintegrative and destructive functions by mobilising addressees to social exclusion and, at worst, to violent attacks against those excluded and denigrated by the orator. (Reisigl, 2008, p. 251)

Researchers working within the tradition of critical discourse studies have developed some essential tools for delineating between these functions in political text and talk. For instance, they have produced critical accounts of how racism, antisemitism, ethnicism, and populism are reflected in discourses (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Krzyżanowski & Wodak, 2009; Wodak, KhosraviNik, & Mral, 2013; Wodak, 2015), provided detailed analyses of the discursive construction of history and national identity (Martin & Wodak, 2003; Heer, Manoschek, Pollak, & Wodak, 2008; Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart, 2009), and carried out ethnographic studies of how language is used in the backstage of political institutions (Wodak, 2011). Importantly, as I will show in the following chapters, the same context-sensitive linguistic tools can be applied to gain a more sophisticated understanding of how blaming and blame avoidance work in government communication (see also Hansson, 2015a, 2015b).

2.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have adopted the lens of blame/avoidance strategies as a heuristic device to distinguish between alternative ways in which government communication is conceptualised in academic literature. I summarise the main characteristics of the four archetypal conceptualisations in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1. Four conceptualisations of government communication

	Policy instrument	Commodity	Manipulation	(Un)doing democracy
Government communication described as:	Necessary 'tool' that the government uses to exert authority and maintain control	Set of services provided by the government to specific groups of customers	Self-serving manipulation of public perceptions and behaviour by the ruling elite	Systemic processes that either advance or limit public participation in political debates
Blaming the government described as:	Deviant (hampers or blocks the achievement of policy objectives)	Business risk (indicates customer dissatisfaction)	Necessary (helps to resist manipulation)	Positive (delimits excessive power) but also negative (increases democratic deficit)
Authors adopt the perspective of:	Government as an authority	Government as a service provider	Victim oppressed by the government	Self-reflective active citizenry
Authors seek answers to questions such as:	How to govern?	How to run a service?	How not to be governed?	How to increase equality and participation in society?
Argumentative shortcuts (topoi) used such as:	Authority Law Stability/tradition	Competition Efficiency Freedom of choice	Individual freedom Burden Resistance	Integrity Democracy Equality
Blame warranted by negative lexis such as:	Disobedience, deviance, disorder	Incompetence, inefficiency	Lying, deception, oppression, dominance, hegemony, abuse, injustice, propaganda, spin	Injustice, inequality, exclusion, lack of integrity, corruption
Blame deflected by positive lexis such as:	Order, control, coordination, regulation, predictability, stability, strategic	Competence, efficiency, choice, utility, service, competitive, customer-friendly, transparency	Resilience, autonomy	Equality, democracy, freedom, integrity, emancipation, reason, understanding, awareness, reflexivity, social change
Media described as:	An adversary if does not obey and support the government; or an extension of the communication 'tool' if supports the government	A customer, subject to persuading, bargaining and negotiating; or a publicity agent; or a competitor, subject to outperforming	Useless, manipulated by government and businesses	A significant social force as it can promote either equality and participation or inequality and isolation in society
Historical origins and influences such as:	Ancient and medieval handbooks for rulers on the practical arts or crafts of governing and public speaking	Early 20th century literature on scientific management and public relations; public choice theories	19th century Marxist conflict theory; Gramscian conceptualisation of 'hegemony'; the Frankfurt School; sociological and psychological studies of oppression	Weber's sociology of power; the Frankfurt School; interpretive, linguistic, and cultural turns in social sciences since 1950s; post-modernist and feminist philosophy

This fourfold distinction is an important step towards understanding the basic ways in which discursive blame avoidance in government communication could be interpreted (and hence a step towards answering my central research question). It suggests that a particular way of interpreting blame avoidance in government is dialectically related to the interpreter's general conceptualisation of government communication.

- If one conceptualises government communication primarily as a policy instrument, blame avoidance seems to be a set of measures that should be activated whenever receiving blame might hamper or block the government from achieving its policy objectives.
- If one conceptualises government communication as a commodity, blame avoidance appears to be a necessary craft of 'managing' blame as a business risk that is related to customer dissatisfaction.
- If government communication is taken to be essentially manipulative, blame avoidance on the side of the government seems to serve the maintenance of unequal power relations between the government and the victims of its manipulation: Avoiding blame means withstanding (and ignoring) the objections less powerful groups and individuals express against the oppression by the ruling elites.
- If one conceptualises government communication as an essential component of democratic political life that may have both positive and negative implications, then both blaming and blame avoidance have a potential to foster social learning as well as to increase democratic deficit.

My focus on alternative ways of framing problems bears resemblance to the grid/group model of cultural theory that originated in the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 1990; Hood, 1998) and the constitutive metamodel of communication theory proposed by Robert T. Craig (1999, 2007). Both of these models outline mutually antagonistic ways of thinking about certain social phenomena: the former does so with 'organising' and the latter with 'communicating'. The results of my study and these two models have some possible links between them that, in my view, would merit further empirical and theoretical analysis.

According to the grid/group cultural theory, one can distinguish between four competing ways of thinking and talking about how various collectivities are organised: hierarchist, individualist, fatalist, and egalitarian (Hood, 1998). Based on my analysis, the 'policy instrument' conceptualisation of government communication may be seen as chiming with the hierarchist view of organising, the 'commodity' conceptualisation with the individualist view, and the 'manipulation' and 'un/doing democracy' conceptualisations with the egalitarian view of organising. Some writings on government communication as manipulation also contain traces of fatalism, for instance, intensified claims of someone being completely and inevitably excluded from important debates over public affairs due to the innate dishonesty of the government and the uselessness of the press in uncovering its deceptive moves.

According to Craig's (1999, 2007) metamodel, one can distinguish between at least eight competing traditions of theorising communication: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, sociopsychological, sociocultural, critical, and pragmatist. In the light of my analysis, it seems that those who write about government/communication from the 'administrative' (or blame taker's) perspective typically gravitate towards three of these traditions: (1) rhetorical tradition, where communication is seen as the practical art of discourse, (2) cybernetic tradition, where communication is conceptualised as the flow of information, and (3) sociopsychological tradition, where the focus is on the effects of interaction on individuals. Why would 'administrative' authors base their works primarily on these selected conceptualisations of communication and largely ignore all the others? I suggest that they do so because these three are the most functionalist traditions in communication research: rhetorical, cybernetic, and sociopsychological approaches are best geared towards generating practical advice on how to avoid blame, how to persuade, control, and manipulate people. As Craig (1999) succinctly puts it, these three traditions, unlike others, "valorise technique" (p. 26).

My proposed heuristic model has at least two caveats. First, it certainly is *not* a comprehensive explanatory or predictive theory and I am not making any claims of its universality. The fourfold classification scheme applies only to existing academic works dealing with government and its communication activities in Western democracies. While empirically grounded, the conceptualisations should be seen as necessarily fuzzy ideal types. Within concrete writings, there may be overlaps and

fusions between the four types. It should not come as a surprise that authors borrow or appropriate concepts from other perspectives (e.g., 'administrative' works may include some 'language of democracy' that is calculated to appeal to some 'critical' readers). An attempt to label each individual author as permanently belonging to only one of the 'streams' could also be misleading. In separate pieces of work, a single author may adopt different stances in relation to blaming the government, thereby contributing to different 'streams' of literature as defined here.

Second, what I have devised is just one possible way of theorising government communication. I have explicitly placed the practical issues of blaming and avoiding blame – or seen more broadly, the discursive negotiations of interpersonal relations of power via legitimising and delegitimising – at the centre stage. I have highlighted some of the fundamental conflicts between different ways of talking and writing about government/communication. In so doing, I am siding with 'critical' rather than 'administrative' approaches and subscribing to the 'un/doing democracy' conceptualisation of government/communication. Indeed, this is evident already in the introductory chapter of this thesis, where I use discursive strategies which are typical to this conceptualisation. And as a critical work, my contribution to the theory of government communication is, of course, itself wide open to criticism.

Despite these caveats, I hope to have expanded the theoretical boundaries of government communication research by showing how its various conceptualisations could be put into conversation with each other over particular issues of blame. In the next chapter, I will shift my focus on the various conceptual tools that can be used to interpret blame/avoidance as a discursive practice.

3. The blame game and the language game: A discursive guide to the politics of blame/avoidance

Since the 1980s, scholars of political science and public administration have produced a substantial body of literature on the topic of blame avoidance in democratic governments (e.g., Weaver, 1986; McGraw, 1990; Pierson, 1994; Bovens, 't Hart, Dekker, & Verheuvel, 1999; Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; Hering, 2008; Hood, 2002, 2011; Mitchell, 2012; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014; Hinterleitner & Sager, 2015). In his seminal article 'The Politics of Blame Avoidance', Kent Weaver (1986) noted that political actors who wield executive power are often motivated in their policy decisions by the desire to avoid blame, because receiving blame might lead to diminished voter support at the next elections.[14] Taking this idea a step further, Christopher Hood (2011) has convincingly argued that blame avoidance should be regarded as a "political and bureaucratic imperative" (p. 24) that guides the behaviour of officeholders at all levels of the government, including those who inhabit non-elected civil service positions. According to Hood, officeholders' concern about receiving blame affects the way government organisations are structured, what kind of policies and operating routines officeholders adopt, and how they present themselves and their work to the public.

A notable metaphor that is commonly used in the blame avoidance literature is government 'blame game'. This metaphor links the target domain of executive politics with the source domain of playing a game. It is notoriously difficult to provide a neat and comprehensive definition of the concept of 'game' (Wittgenstein, 1953). Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to suggest that by using the 'blame game' metaphor the writers essentially represent those political actors who blame, and those who avoid blame as 'players' that use their skills and other resources to try to 'win' some kind of competition by making certain calculated 'moves' in a supposedly adversarial interaction.

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[14] Weaver's conceptualisation of the politics of blame avoidance was notably influenced by the psychological theories of choice that emphasised the 'negativity bias': the notion that the perception of risk influences people's decision making more than the prospect of potential gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

The interactive nature of the blame game means that if an analyst wants to develop a comprehensive understanding of blame avoidance, she should also pay due attention to how (and by whom, in relation to what, for what purposes, etc.) blame is generated. And vice versa: a study of blame-making would remain incomplete without considering the possibility that a blame attack might be pre-empted, mitigated or countered by a potential blame taker. Ignoring one side of the interaction would be as futile as trying to understand a chess or football match by looking at *only* defensive or *only* offensive strategies adopted by the players.[15]

In my study, I treat academic text and talk about blame and blame avoidance as 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 1953), and as recontextualisations[16] whereby text producers omit, background, emphasise, or modify certain aspects of social reality (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999). This allows me to study the 'anatomy' of the blame game from a discursive point of view: to identify some recurring components (or content topics) in stories about blame and blame avoidance in government, and suggest ways of analysing blame and blame avoidance as concrete institutionally and historically situated discursive practices. My overall goal is to improve our understanding of how blame games are constructed through language and to help orient future studies on this topic. Hence, I begin by situating the discursive study of political blame games in the wider scholarship dealing with a variety of blame phenomena.

3.1 Approaches to blame phenomena

The approach I adopt when I examine blame phenomena is multidisciplinary and discursive. What this means, above all, is that rather than trying to define through the lens of a particular discipline what blame 'is' (or to determine when it is appropriate

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[15] That is why I prefer to use the term 'blame/avoidance' instead of 'blame avoidance': the former is meant to stand for an integral relationship while the latter seems to refer exclusively to the motivations and actions of a 'defending side'. Indeed, blaming and avoiding blame imply each other, just like Foucault's (1980) 'power/knowledge'. By using the fused concept of blame/avoidance I wish to (a) emphasise the dynamic, conversational character of blame phenomena in political life, and (b) remind the readers that someone who is being blamed may choose to generate blame in response – so that 'avoiding blame' sometimes paradoxically means 'generating blame'.

[16] 'Recontextualising' is a term that is used in discourse studies to refer to the transformations that occur when a practice is turned into discourses, e.g., when it is written or spoken about in a variety of ways (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; van Leeuwen, 2008).

to blame someone, or which are the most effective moves if one wants to avoid blame, etc.), I look at how blame phenomena are constructed through language use, and discuss how these may be subjectively perceived. There is no single universal definition of 'blame' – and perhaps there should not be one. I presume that there are many different ways one could conceptualise 'blame' and related phenomena. As will become clear below, researchers ask different questions about blame phenomena and go about answering these in a variety of ways.

As an initial orienting step, I suggest that the academic approaches to blame phenomena can be divided into three broad groups based on whether these are mainly grounded in philosophical, psychological, or sociological research traditions.

Philosophically oriented approaches to blame are based on logical argument, intuitions, conceptual analysis, thought experiments, and introspection. Usually scholars imagine and discuss hypothetical scenarios to illustrate what 'blameworthiness' or 'being a moral agent' might mean: neither experiments nor ethnographic fieldwork are carried out and no substantial amount of real-life data is collected.

Scholars of moral philosophy (or ethics) have traditionally been engaged in discussions over the abstract concepts of 'moral responsibility' and 'moral agency', their principal question being 'who is an apt candidate for blame or praise'. Such discussions have a very long history in the Western philosophical tradition, dating back at least to Aristotle's 350 B.C. *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2004)*.* Much of these historical debates have involved metaphysical attempts at defining (seemingly rational and universal) criteria for blameworthiness (Strawson, 1962). More recently, philosophers have focused on the role of blame in interpersonal relationships and regard blaming as a natural reaction we have towards someone's ill will, as well as a tool we use to regulate others' attitudes and behaviour (Coates & Tognazzini, 2013b). They remind us that blaming should not be regarded as something essentially negative or harmful. In his book *In Praise of Blame*, George Sher (2006) rightly argues that "living a fully moral life requires blaming those who ignore or flout morality's demands" as the "unpleasantness of the anger and reproaches that wrongdoers and bad people must often endure" can be seen as playing a "valuable educative and deterrent role" (p. 138).

What could be seen as constituting 'flouting morality's demands' is one of the central themes in ethical theorising. There are three competing traditions in contemporary Western moral philosophy:

1. *deontology*, a view that an act and/or intention should be evaluated on the basis of whether or not it conforms with a moral norm (a right or a duty);

2. *consequentialism*, a view that an act and/or intention should be evaluated on the basis of its outcomes; and

3. *virtue ethics*, a view that an act and/or intention should be evaluated on the basis of the character of the actor (e.g., her honesty, benevolence, etc.).

For a discursive study of government blame games, the main takeaway points from the reading of philosophical literature are that (a) blame can be conceptualised and talked about in either more abstract or more practical ways, (b) blaming can be regarded as a natural response as well as more or less calculated action that carries a social function, (c) participants in a blame game may choose to emphasise in their text and talk either the rights and obligations of actors, consequences of actions, or the character traits of actors, and (d) blame phenomena can only be understood in relation to particular systems of (shared) values.

Psychologically oriented studies of blame typically seek to provide empirical answers to questions about people's mental processes in relation to moral judgements. In contrast to philosophical approaches, psychological blame phenomena are often studied quantitatively, that is, measured by subjecting selected human participants to various tests like questionnaires, brain imaging, timing of task completion, and so forth (e.g., see Weiner, 2006). While there are many competing views within the discipline of psychology on how blame should be theorised (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Malle, Monroe, & Guglielmo, 2014), researchers share a common interest in what is happening *inside the mind of a person* who makes certain moral judgments or experiences moral emotions.[17] Accordingly, scholars who mainly use

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[17] Blame has both private (mental) and public (social) sides. Psychological studies of blame tend to focus on the former, unexpressed and invisible side: the results of experiments are usually interpreted as reflecting the test subjects' moral emotions (e.g., anger, guilt, shame) and judgments, that is, evaluations of the wrongness and permissibility of actions, and socio-cognitive assessments of mental states and intentions of other persons. The mental processes may include perceiving an event (i.e., behaviour or outcome) as violating some norm, assessing the severity of the violation, establishing a causal link between the event and an agent (individual or group), judging whether the agent acted

psychological research methods tend to pay relatively little attention to (the social construction and uses of) norms, histories, traditions, social problems, and power relations that may underlie blame phenomena in political life – these 'variables' cannot be easily detected and manipulated in experimental settings.

Sociologically oriented approaches to blame are adopted by scholars who are generally less interested in understanding blame phenomena primarily as mental processes of individuals, or as topics of abstract theorising. Instead, their interest lies mainly in making sense of blame phenomena that unfold in human social action in real-life (non-experimental) situations, often occurring at the level of groups and societies. Such scholars include sociologists (e.g., Goffman, 1967, 2010; Thompson, 2000; Adut, 2008; Tilly, 2008), political scientists (e.g., Weaver, 1986; Anderson, 1995; Hood, 2011; Young, 2011; Stone, 2012), anthropologists (e.g., Douglas, 1982), criminal law theorists (e.g., Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980; Robinson, 1982; Moore, 2010; Crofts, 2013; Dingwall & Hillier, 2015), communication researchers (e.g., Iyengar, 1990; Knobloch-Westerwick & Taylor, 2008; Entman, 2012; Ewart & McLean, 2015), and linguists (e.g., Pomerantz, 1978; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Buttny, 1993; Benke & Wodak, 2003; Wodak, 2006a).

Some of these researchers concentrate on micro-sociological analysis of concrete interpersonal encounters that may involve blaming while others approach blame in relation to macro-level social, political, cultural and historical processes like (de)legitimation of political power and action, social change, democratic elections, mediated scandals, and crisis tendencies in certain societal arrangements. Accordingly, knowledge of blame phenomena is constructed using various quantitative and qualitative social science research methods, including forms of analysis of text and talk, interviews, ethnographic observations, opinion surveys, and statistical modelling.

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intentionally, considering what may have been the reasons for her action, considering the agent's obligation and capacity for preventing norm violation (i.e., whether she should and could have avoided this), considering agent's character, and experiencing moral emotions that interact with other mental processes (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Alicke, 2000; Shaver, 1985; Weiner, 2006). Psychologists who study the attribution of blame in the tradition of Heider (1958), note that the cause of an actor's behaviour can be either *internalised* (e.g., attributed to her ability or effort) or *externalised* (attributed to situational factors, e.g., peer hindrance). A lot of research has focused on attributional biases, that is, systematic errors people tend to make when reasoning about the causes of behaviours. Probably the most widely known of these biases is called *the fundamental attribution error* – "the relative disregarding of situational causality or the over-allocation of dispositional ascriptions" (Weiner, 2006, p. xvii).

In addition, such studies are more or less explicitly couched in at least one of the main streams of social theorising: functionalism, conflict theories, and symbolic interactionism.

- From a *functionalist* perspective, blaming may be seen as an instrument of social regulation or social control, and evaluated on the basis of whether it supports or disrupts the operation of society as a whole.
- From a *conflict theoretical* perspective, blaming is intimately related to the notions of social critique and political crisis: Blaming is a way of contesting powerful groups and individuals who cause or sustain injustice, inequality, xenophobia, and other social problems that are constructed by less powerful groups and individuals as needing a decisive intervention. Accordingly, from such a critical point of view, blame avoidance could be seen as a set of strategies that powerful groups and individuals use to defend themselves against social critique and hold on to power.
- At the centre of micro-sociological *symbolic interactionist* accounts of blame phenomena is the notion of meaning making: Blaming and blame avoidance may be seen as conversations between people who ascribe meaning to objects, actions, and concepts.

A discursive study of government blame game, as I see it, mainly follows the symbolic interactionist path: the blame game is conceived of as a goal-oriented and often highly mediated discursive struggle over the meaning of (potentially negative) events and (potentially blameworthy) actors in relation to government. Hence, to carry out a comprehensive analysis of a government blame game, one needs to combine at least three kinds of specialist knowledge:

1. how people use symbolic resources like language, images, props, and so forth, to construct certain impressions and persuade others to change their attitudes and behaviour in relation to a participant of a blame game;
2. how people use various media to amplify, sustain, or cover up stories about blame issues, so that government-related mediated scandals emerge (or do not emerge); and

3. how the behaviour of the participants in the blame game is both facilitated and constrained by various institutional, historical, and political factors (e.g., the political triggers and outcomes of a blame game).

A useful heuristic device for bringing these types of knowledge together is the context model employed in discourse-historical studies (Wodak, 2011). According to this model, researchers should interpret a blame game by switching systematically between several levels of analysis. Doing a micro-level linguistic analysis means zooming in on *concrete episodes of text and talk* and *intertextual and interdiscursive relationships,* for instance, capturing the dynamics of interaction and taking into consideration other texts that the interactants may incorporate or refer to in their offensive or defensive messages. The analysis of *extra-linguistic institutional and situational variables* means engaging with middle-range theories that focus on the institutions involved in the blame game, including media as the venue where the most visible games are initiated and played out. Macro-level analysis means zooming out to capture broader *historical and socio-political backdrop,* for instance, the financial crisis and austerity politics as a motivation for various groups to cast blame on the government and a motivation for government officeholders to try to ward off blame.

In the next section I outline some of the conceptual tools and insights that, in my view, are essential for analysing government blame games at these levels: discursive strategies of persuasion, mediation of blame (scandal and crisis), and the variables of the political and institutional environment.

3.2 Conceptual tools for analysing government blame games

Discursive strategies

A central concept for the linguistic analysis of blame games is *discursive strategy.* Discourse analysis traditionally involves examining concrete instances of text or talk as linguistic means for persuasion and hypothesising about their goals and effects. Discursive strategies may be conceived of as conventionalised macroconversational

practices adopted by speakers or writers to achieve particular goals (e.g., political, social, psychological).[18]

This line of analysis can be traced back to Aristotle's 4th century BC *On Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 2007)*,* a seminal treatise of the art and ethics of public speaking. Perhaps the most well-known insight from this work is his threefold typology of the general modes of persuasion by spoken word: the perceived credibility and goodwill of the speaker (*ethos*), appeals to the emotions of the audience (*pathos*), and logical argumentation (*logos*). All of these means of persuasion are exploited by the participants in government blame games. Receiving blame may diminish the perceived credibility of the speaker as a source. Thus the strategic placing of blame can be seen as an attempt to deprive the blame taker of some of her persuasive means. Accordingly, from a classical rhetorical perspective, an officeholder who tries to avoid blame does so not only to defend the public impression of her good character but also to keep her persuasive 'artillery' intact.

Participants in a blame game deploy discursive strategies either to attack or defend *face*. 'Face' is a key analytic concept for scholars who study blame phenomena within the traditions of symbolic interactionist sociology, sociopragmatics, and discourse-historical analysis. From Erving Goffman's (1969) dramaturgical perspective, face (or 'mask' or 'front') is a set of techniques that is used by a performing person (e.g., a government officeholder speaking on television) to control the way audience perceives her. Face can also be conceptualised a set of basic human wants: People want to act so that they are not impeded by others, and people want their goals to be approved by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987). By blaming a person we express disapproval. Thus blaming can be categorised as a 'face threatening act'. In this sense, blaming belongs to a broad family of linguistic ways of causing offence. Face-threatening behaviour includes, for instance, using insults, complaints, silencers ('Shut up!'), threats and negative expressives, ignoring the other's presence, belittling the other, interrupting, and seeking disagreement (Culpeper, 1996, 2011, 2015).[19]

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[18] For a concise discussion of the various uses of the term 'strategy' in linguistics, see Culpeper (2015).
[19] Blaming should be distinguished from many seemingly similar acts like criticising someone's ideas, disagreeing with someone, calling someone names, being impolite or rude to someone, heckling, judging or evaluating someone's action or an outcome as negative, or expressing a negative emotion:

Blame-avoiding behaviour can be thought of as serving the goal of saving one's face. On the one hand, a potential blame taker may try to avoid various acts that might threaten her own face, for example, (possibly) confrontational encounters, confessions, admissions of guilt, and self-contradictions. On the other hand, a (potential) blame taker may choose to carry out various acts that either uphold or attack face of the (potential) blame maker and/or the audience of the blame game with a view to reducing their desire to generate blame. Upholding face could take the form of acting politely to help "maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations" (Leech, 1983, p. 82) with others. This can be realised in a variety of ways, for example, by claiming common ground (e.g., using ingroup identity markers, presupposing common knowledge, joking, expressing admiration and interest), representing the relationship as cooperative (e.g., assuming and asserting reciprocity, expressing concern for the wants of others), fulfilling the wants of others (e.g., giving gifts), and minimising imposing on others by being indirect, hedging, impersonalising and nominalising (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Attacking face to avoid blame could take the form of what Culpeper (2011) calls 'coercive impoliteness': offensive language use that is calculated to force a (potential) blame maker to withhold her (future) criticism. An impolite utterance serves a function of coercion, for example, when in response to a journalist's blame-implicative question at a press briefing, an officeholder says that asking such a question is foolish.[20]

In general, the systematic ways individuals and groups use language to persuade others to blame or not to blame someone can be broken down into linguistic strategies of naming, attributing, arguing, perspective taking, and intensifying/mitigating (Reisigl & Wodak, 2009; Kwon, Clarke, & Wodak, 2009; Clarke, Kwon, & Wodak, 2012; Wodak, 2011; see also Appendix A).

- *Naming* and *attributing* can be used to mobilise audiences by establishing ingroups and outgroups and labelling actors or actions as positive (e.g., 'a great opportunity') or negative (e.g., 'troubled'). This often involves the use of

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all of these communicative acts can be realised so that they do not imply that the addressee should be seen as blameworthy.

[20] Culpeper's (2011) distinguishes between three functions of impoliteness: affective, coercive and entertaining. I suggest that the same functions apply to blame. Blaming can be seen as an 'objective' affective reaction to someone's behaviour, as a 'whip' for enforcing someone to comply, or as a performance put up to entertain an audience.

linguistic membership categorisation devices and references to stereotypes. For example, if in an official announcement a cabinet minister in the UK compares the UK economy with that of 'troubled Europe', he may be attempting to diminish the risk of receiving blame from UK citizens by implying that they belong to a privileged, 'non-troubled' ingroup.

- *Arguing* involves using argumentation schemes and warrants that lead to the conclusion that someone should be blamed or not. For example, to support a standpoint that a particular officeholder deserves blame, a blame maker may be asked to demonstrate that the officeholder caused a negative outcome, did it intentionally, and had an obligation and capacity to prevent it.

- *Perspective taking* involves using a variety of linguistic devices (e.g., deictics, reported speech, metaphors) to indicate speaker's or writer's point of view and involvement, that is, whether she is aligning with the position of the blame maker or the blame taker in a particular blame game. For example, when a news story contains several direct quotations of an opposition politician who is blaming the government but the blame taker is not quoted once, then the text seems to primarily represent the blame maker's perspective.

- *Intensifying* and *mitigating* devices (e.g., hyperboles, vague expressions, hesitations) are used by participants to modify the epistemic and deontic status of utterances. For example, when a minister says in a speech, "I've always believed in the benefits of migration and immigration", then the word 'always' is a hyperbole that she perhaps uses to fend off possible criticism for taking an 'anti-immigration' stance or for changing her previously held views.

Such detailed linguistic breakdowns, combined with knowledge of several layers of context, help us identify and examine the techniques that speakers and writers use to trigger particular emotional reactions from certain audiences or to exploit audience's vulnerability (e.g., cognitive limitations or biases in judgement) by persuading them emotionally rather than rationally. For instance, blame/avoidance may involve argumentative moves which may be regarded as fallacious to attribute blame to the opponent. These moves include, among others, *argumentum ad hominem* (pointing

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out a negative characteristic of the opponent), *tu quoque* (appeal to opponent's hypocrisy), and victim-perpetrator reversal (blaming the victim).[21]

These basic linguistic strategies may be conceived of as small but essential building blocks of offensive and defensive formations used by participants in blame games of all sorts. However, political scientists who study the inner workings of public administration provide us with insights into discursive strategies that are more specific to government. They point out some compelling ways in which blame-related language games and their inherent and frequently presupposed rules are embedded in the construction of government policies and the everyday professional lives of executive officeholders.

The political scientist Deborah Stone (1989, 2012) suggests that we should look at how political actors construct *causal stories* that place blame to certain actors for certain situations or actions and, by doing this, affect the formation of public policy agendas. Stone claims that causal stories form the essence of political problem definition and are thus instrumental in struggles between individuals and groups over policy issues.

> Problem definition is centrally concerned with attributing bad conditions to human behaviour instead of to accident, fate, or nature. . . .The process of problem definition cannot be explained by looking solely at political actors, the nature of bad conditions, or the characteristics of issues. Problem definition is the active manipulation of *images* of conditions by competing political actors. Conditions come to be defined as problems through the strategic portrayal of causal stories. (Stone, 1989, p. 299)

Causal stories differ based on whether the actions in question are described as unguided or purposeful and whether the consequences of these actions are depicted as intended or unintended. The types of causal stories, with admittedly fuzzy boundaries, can be roughly mapped out as follows (Stone, 1989, p. 285):

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[21] For useful discussions of fallacious arguments, see, for instance, van Eemeren & Grootendorst (1992), Reisigl & Wodak (2001), and Walton (2008).

- *Intentional cause*. People are perceived to have direct control over their actions and carry these out with a particular goal in mind. Examples include stories about assault, oppression, victimising, and deliberately concealed activities.

- *Mechanical cause*. People are perceived to behave wilfully, but have only indirect control over the outcome because of the involvement of an 'intervening agent'. Examples include blaming technology for disasters at power plants or aeroplane accidents, and blaming people for causing harm when they carry out the will of others.

- *Inadvertent cause*. People are perceived to behave wilfully, but with unintended consequences. Examples include stories of 'harmful side effects of well-intentioned policy', but also stories of carelessness and recklessness.

- *Accidental cause*. Total absence of human control and intention. Examples include natural disasters and accidents caused by severe weather conditions.

Importantly, during a debate or confrontation, political actors may calculatedly choose to 'move' between these different stories, or try to 'push' explanations from one causal story type to another, based on their perceived argumentative strength, to defend their position.

Hood (1998) provides another useful government-specific analytic tool for making sense of competing stories of blame. Drawing upon the grid/group cultural theory devised by the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1982), Hood suggests that people regard different public administration phenomena as 'failures' or 'problems' depending on their world-view or 'cultural bias'. Four distinct ideal type world-views can be delineated, each of which entails a general understanding of how government should be organised, what government should or should not do, what constitutes a problem or a failure in government, and how these matters should be talked about.

Accordingly, Hood (1998, pp. 24–26) outlines four distinct and mutually exclusive clusters of government-related blame that people who share a particular world view typically produce when almost any kind of problems occur. Each of these lines of blame can be paired up with a plausible counter-argument that emphasises the negative aspects of the alternative course of action that the blame maker seems to promote.

1. *Poor compliance with established rules and lack of professional expertise.* Lack of rules, not enough strict following of existing rules and best practices, too little planning, poor coordination, unclear assignment of authority, weak managerial 'grip', and limited use of expert knowledge. These events prevail in blame narratives generated from the 'hierarchist' point of view. To counter such criticism, one may choose to emphasise the risk of *fiascos resulting from excessive trust in authority and expertise*. These include large-scale policy planning and delivery failures (which may lead to technological disasters, military defeat, etc.) that are caused by massive miscalculations and human error, often as a result of 'groupthink', procedural rigidity, and failure to learn from mistakes. These failures are characteristic of the 'hierarchist' way of organising.

2. *Abuse of power by top-level government leaders and system corruption.* Too many (often contradictory) rules, overly strict (blind, rigid) rule following, overreliance on experts, the tendency to scapegoat subordinate officials and to blame the victims, deficit of 'democracy', too little 'empowerment' of people who could challenge the self-interest of leaders, lack of community participation. These events prevail in the 'egalitarian' stories about government failures. To counter such criticism, one may choose to emphasise the risk of *unresolved conflict*. This essentially includes perceived lack of capacity to govern effectively and to exert central authority, resulting in seemingly endless confrontations, disobedience of public servants, and in extreme cases – civil war. These failures are characteristic of the 'egalitarian' way of organising.

3. *Faulty incentive structures through over-collectivisation and lack of price signals.* Too much collectivisation and organisation, excessive faith in planning and authority, lack of regard to individuals as self-interested rational choosers, too little stress on personal ambition and competition among individuals, ignoring the advantages of market systems. These charges are typically presented in government-related failure stories produced by the adherents of 'individualist' world-view. To counter such criticism, one may choose to emphasise the risk of giving rise to *private gain from public office*.

Problems under this category include misappropriation of public property, extortion, and bribery (corruption); abandonment (avoiding unpleasant work); grandeur, self-indulgence, and ego-tripping. These failures are characteristic of the 'individualist' way of organising.

4. *No one should be blamed*. Many problems and failures in societal life are unique, random, unpredictable, unintended, and involve indeterminate 'X-factors'. Thus blaming a person or a system (or government) for a past failure is wrong and prescribing big 'remedies' against future failures is futile. According to Hood (1998), such views are voiced by those who share a 'fatalist' cultural bias according to the grid/group theory. To counter this stance, one may choose to highlight the risks related to *apathy and inertia*. This includes perceived lack of planning, initiative, and foresight; lack of disposition to take responsibility, being stuck in (possibly pointless) routines, and incapability to take action to avoid serious dangers and to overcome extreme problems. These failures are characteristic of the 'fatalist' way of organising.

Hood's analysis drives home the point that there cannot exist a particular way of governing that would be universally failure-proof and thus also blame-proof. Failure and blame are inseparable aspects of political life. Therefore government officeholders carefully seek to present themselves in ways that might limit blame. Some of the most typical 'presentational strategies' (Hood, 2011) of blame avoidance in public administration include engaging in an argument over blameworthiness (denying, providing justifications or excuses, shifting blame), offering a quick apology to deflate blame, diverting public attention away from the blame-attracting event or actor, and using covert ways to discourage blame-generating (e.g., hiding information about failures and norm-violations, threatening potential blame makers).

For a more detailed analysis, the specific ways government officeholders use language to avoid blame can be broken down into discursive strategies of arguing, framing, representing social actors and actions, denying, legitimising, and manipulating (see Chapter 4; Hansson, 2015a).

A close analysis of the discursive strategies – conventional goal-oriented macroconversational practices – is a necessary first step towards making sense of a

government blame game. However, government blame games usually take place on highly visible stages like websites, television, radio, and newspapers. Such extensive mediation adds specific variables to the game, thus compelling the analyst to engage with relevant insights from the sociology of media.

Mediation of blame

Within media sociology and communication studies, government blame games can be interpreted in terms of theories of mediated scandal. Political scandals could be seen as "struggles over symbolic power" which have the capacity to "destroy reputations" of (often powerful) individuals and "undermine trust" in them (Thompson, 2000, p. 245).

According to the sociologist John B. Thompson (2000), the common themes of political scandals include sexual transgressions, financial misconduct, and abuse of power by top officeholders. Such scandals, Thompson writes, have the following five characteristics:

1. someone breaks a norm in (at least partial) secrecy;
2. the occurrence of transgression becomes known to a 'non participant';
3. someone who learns about the transgression feels offended by the transgression;
4. someone expresses publicly (via media) their disapproval of the transgression;
5. publicly expressed blame poses a threat to the reputation of the person(s) who committed the transgression.

Other authors have more recently pointed out that the transgressions that precede publicised allegations (1) are often *not* real, but only apparent or alleged, and (2) are often *not* concealed but are well-known to many (Adut, 2008; Entman, 2012). Indeed, a frequent type of political scandal is 'talk scandal' which arises when a politician says something – often publicly and in the limelight of media – that is disapproved by some observer(s) as an illegitimate or inappropriate speech act (Ekström & Johansson, 2008). Hence, a scandal could be more broadly defined as "an event of varying duration that starts with the publication of a real, apparent, or alleged transgression to

a negatively oriented audience and lasts as long as there is significant and sustained public interest in it" (Adut, 2008, p. 12).[22]

A central concept used in analysing mediated scandal is *framing* (see, among many others, Goffman, 1974; de Vreese, 2012; Entman, 1993, 2012). Framing occurs when communicators, for example news reporters, "select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). From this perspective, blame/avoidance can be perceived as competitive framing – the juxtaposing of frames and counter-frames by blame makers and blame takers in the media. In their stories, journalists tend to (and are trained to) select, configure, and present information about (alleged) transgressions and expressions of disapproval in such ways which emphasise the existence of conflicts and help to construct a dramatised 'scandal narrative' (Allern & Pollack, 2012). Scandal narratives are based on familiar cultural frameworks, often simplified as dynamic oppositions between a villain and a hero, an aggressor and a victim, good and evil. Obviously, the logic of these narratives involves a need for a resolution, which usually means administering some type of punishment to the 'villains'.[23]

News organisations tend to regard launching a scandal as a benchmark of success. A 'scandalous' story may provoke other media institutions to join in the intense and critical reporting of the topic, leading to a phenomenon sometimes called a 'media hunt' (Allern & Pollack, 2012). Political opponents of the government may exploit the media's preference for scandal to launch 'character attacks' against individual officeholders (Castells, 2009). These may involve blaming or simply presenting the target in a negative light: as someone who is untrustworthy, hypocritical, reckless, and lacking moral purity. News media often play an important agenda-setting role in the opposition–government blame game: When journalists produce stories about social

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[22] Adut (2008) suggests that analytic approaches to scandal can be broadly divided into 'objectivist' and 'constructivist'. Objectivists, like Thompson (2000), generally focus on instances of real misconduct (e.g., corruption) and discuss the causes of such deviance. Constructivists, however, tend to be more concerned with public reactions to and social construction of scandals as rituals that represent cultural divisions in society.

[23] Frames that are specific to news media can be divided into episodic and thematic: episodic framing, which is particularly common in television news, emphasises individual causality and thereby also individual blame (Iyengar, 1990, 1991). In addition, construction of conflict and blame in news media should be seen as part of the discursive construction of news values (Bednarek & Caple, 2012).

problems, opposition parties may use these as 'ammunition' to attack the government (Thesen, 2013).[24]

Interestingly, government officeholders may act as 'cooperators' in constructing and elevating scandals. In his study of presidential scandals in the United States, Bob Entman (2012, pp. 25-26) observes that

> journalists require official investigations, reports, leaks or confessions by somebody directly involved for evidence of the misbehaviour to publicise. For scandal news to attain significant magnitude, the media need official government actions responding to initial disclosures. This creates continuing news pegs and stories worth pursuing because of their potential political fallout or because they reveal additional malfeasance.

Officeholders' attempts to cover up their transgressions when a scandal has broken can be perceived as 'second-order transgressions' (Thompson, 2000) that may instigate further blame attacks, thereby magnifying rather than mitigating the ongoing scandal. Moreover, politicians may sometimes deliberately provoke a scandal by publicly violating some norm (e.g., by saying something 'politically incorrect') with the implicit goal of (re)setting the news agenda and receiving a lot of media coverage (Wodak, 2014, p. 115; see also Wodak, 2015).

Much like with scandals, blaming can also be seen as a constitutive element of *crises* – discursive representations of some kind of failure that needs decisive intervention. The political scientist Colin Hay (1996) proposes that the discursive construction of crisis should be seen as a process of abstraction through which various stories about complexly related or independent events and statistics are linked together as 'symptoms' of a crisis. When a crisis narrative has been established, people tend to include more (possibly unrelated) phenomena into this more general story, as "the crisis diagnosis is confirmed in each new 'symptom' which can be assimilated within this meta-narrative" (Hay, 1996, p. 268). Importantly, the attributions of blame related

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[24] However, the effects of scandal coverage to individual members of the audience are not straightforward: People do not directly subscribe to (often fragmentary) media frames of norm violations but interpret mediated representations of scandals based on their cognitive and emotional reactions and individual frames (Kepplinger, Geiss, & Siebert, 2012).

to specific actors and events may be backgrounded or omitted in the process of such abstraction.

The links between the concepts of 'blame', 'scandal', and 'crisis' could be described briefly as follows: The speech act of blaming can be seen as an elementary unit needed to discursively construct scandals or crises. A reference to a speech act of blaming related to a description of some kind of (alleged) transgression can be applied in journalistic storytelling to establish a conflict frame, thus making the story more newsworthy. Widely mediated publication of allegations related to certain transgressions combined with significant and sustained public interest in these events can be labelled 'scandals'. And references to particular 'scandals' can, in turn, be embedded into a meta-narrative of a 'crisis' as its 'symptoms'.

A good sociological understanding of how mediated scandals and crises are constructed clearly complements the textually or rhetorically oriented study of blame/avoidance. However, government blame games are constrained by a sophisticated web of structural political and historical variables. How does the political environment affect the blame game?

Political environment

In a book titled *Defending Politics: Why Democracy Matters in the 21st Century*, the political scientist Matthew Flinders (2012, pp. 100–101) states:

> For the media and the public blame games exist because of the 'self-evident truth' that politicians always attempt to hide their corrupt behaviour or failed policies by seeking to shift the blame onto the shoulders of others (e.g. bureaucrats, the previous government, etc.). In some cases this interpretation may be absolutely correct but in the majority of cases the explanation is far less scandalous: modern government and governance is … incredibly complex.

All aspects of this complex system, of course, cannot be described in a nutshell. However, it is reasonable to pay due attention to some of the political variables that have received particular attention from the political scientists who study the politics of blame avoidance.

The main structural precondition for the emergence of a government blame game is "the ability of citizens and/or politicians to hold government officials accountable, be it through elections, votes of confidence in Parliament, demonstrations, or coups d'etat" (Weaver, 1986, p. 390). When government officeholders choose which policy to pursue, they are mainly driven by one of the following three motivations (Weaver, 1986, p. 372): They may either seek to

1. *maximise benefits to society*: to adopt what seem to be 'good policies', regardless of what the voters might think,
2. *maximise political payoff*: to do what voters like, so that policymakers can claim credit for pleasing them, or
3. *minimise blame*: to do what voters do not dislike, so that they would not 'punish' the policymaker at the next elections.

Democratically elected governments increasingly engage in blame avoiding behaviour when (a) fiscal stress motivates them to initiate loss-imposing initiatives (e.g., welfare cuts) that hurt the interests of some groups; (b) citizens base their electoral decision on the perceived performance and credibility of the incumbent government instead of remaining loyal to a specific political party; and (c) interest groups engage in more active and sophisticated blame making (Weaver, 1986; Pal & Weaver, 2003).

The field of the blame game expands as the government expands its field of regulation: "The more governments attempt to do, the more likely they are to be held liable for poor performance, or for policy changes that impose losses, in those sectors" (Weaver, 1986, p. 390). Therefore, for the political leaders of the government, one of the most salient defensive moves in the blame game is to limit the regulatory field of the government: to depoliticise some of the decision making.

If a loss-imposing policy decision has to be made, then the government may try to diffuse or delay the losses (so that the concrete 'loser' is not evident or the losses will only occur in the future), delegate the making of this decision (e.g., to an independent commission), find a scapegoat (e.g., claim that the decision is made necessary by the problems caused by the previous government), support an alternative decision that is more popular, diffuse blame by sharing it among as many actors as possible, and restrict their discretion so the decision seems inevitable (Weaver, 1986, p. 385). Governments may also try to 'buy off' the opponents of their policies by providing

some sort of compensation (Pierson, 1994), or to cooperate informally with the opposition parties to reduce their blame-generating motivation (Hering, 2008).

The degree of centralisation of power is an important variable that constrains the moves in policy-related blame games (Weaver, 1986). Decentralised governments are more likely to try to avoid blame by delegating blame-generating decisions to someone else, for example, the parliament. Centralised governments are more disposed to place blame to an external scapegoat, for instance, the previous government. Authoritarian governments are more likely to try to suppress blame. Governments in parliamentary systems are more likely to attempt delaying bad policy outcomes to avoid blame. Coalition governments tend to be less punished at the elections for poor economic performance than single-party governments. The role of the political opposition is also structurally determined:

> So long as there is a majority government, opposition parties in parliamentary systems can do little other than generate blame, for they cannot hope to have an effective voice in formulating policy. In countries with Question Time or its equivalent, this blame-generating process has become highly institutionalised. The opposition seeks to embarrass the government, and the government seeks to dodge the questions, obfuscate or counterattack. (Weaver, 1986, p. 391)

Blame games are constrained by the institutional architecture of government organisations (Hood, 2011). In some organisational arrangements, top officeholders delegate the responsibility for problematic decisions and services to lower-level 'lightning rods'. Organisations may be reorganised so that the perceived obligation and capacity of officeholders to deal with certain problems becomes muddled. The establishment of inter-organisational (inter-governmental, public-private, etc.) partnership structures can have an effect of diffusing blame risk. And some aspects of administrative organisations may be (re)structured according to 'market forces', thereby impersonalising the causes of any troubles that may occur.

Blame games are also constrained by the operating routines adopted in government organisations (Hood, 2011). A very common characteristic of bureaucratic operating is the extremely careful following of rules and standards, doing everything 'by the book', thereby avoiding individual discretion. This means that if something bad happens, officeholders may try to limit the perception of their capacity and

intentionality by pointing the finger at the established rules. Another typical operational feature in many government organisations is doing everything collectively, as a group. This is expected to have an effect of diffusing possible blame. In other settings, on the contrary, the blame risk may be individualised, for instance, by establishing individual performance targets for each officeholder and thereafter scapegoating them whenever a target is not met. And importantly, government organisations may try to avoid doing things that could attract or substantiate blame. For instance, providing less public services and not keeping written records of certain activities of an organisation may be seen as reducing the overall blame risk.

I started off this chapter by briefly outlining some of the different ways blame phenomena can be studied, and introducing a discursive approach to understanding government blame game. Then I covered the main conceptual tools and insights needed to interpret the government blame games on three levels of analysis: discourse, media, and politics. Next, I will dissect the blame game, conceived of as a language game, into its typical content topics. What are the key components of stories about blame/avoidance in government?

3.3 The discursive components of government blame games

On the basis of a multidisciplinary literature review and the analysis of my UK government communication data set, I suggest that much of text and talk about the government blame games in modern Western democracies revolve around the following nine content topics:

1. *blame makers*: individuals or groups who generate blame;
2. *blame takers*: individuals, groups or entities receiving blame;
3. *norms*: rules or expectations that are claimed to be violated or conformed to;
4. *events*: behaviours or outcomes that are evaluated in light of norms;
5. *audiences*: individuals or groups who observe the blame game;
6. *contexts*: situational, institutional, and socio-historical settings of the blame game;
7. *moves*: actions undertaken by the participants and observers of the blame game;
8. *outcomes*: results of the blame game; and
9. *metadiscourses*: text and talk about the discursive blame game.

This 'checklist' could serve as a tentative guide for researchers who try to make sense of the discursive aspects of blaming and blame avoidance in political life. Importantly, not all of these topics are always overtly expressed in every account of a blame game: Certain features may be omitted or merely implied in the story. I will briefly touch upon each of these features in turn.

Blame makers

Blame makers in the sense of the blame game are individuals or groups who attribute or are likely to attribute blame to someone – and make this attribution accessible to an audience of hearers or readers. Blame makers can be conceived of as the metaphorical 'prosecutors' who press charges against a blame taker (a 'defendant') or 'judges' who evaluate a blame taker and an event and announce their decision regarding the degree of blameworthiness of the blame taker. 'Blame maker' could be seen as a relational identity: by expressing blame, the speaker/writer claims a certain moral standing and positions herself in relation to others; she distances herself from a blameworthy actor and a negative event, and aligns herself with others who potentially share her stance.

There are many *potential blame makers*: individuals and groups who seem constantly ready to saddle government officeholders with blame. If something goes wrong or people suffer a loss then various critics often seem to be predisposed to point finger at government, perceived to possess the capacity and obligation to prevent harmful events (e.g., a terrorist attack, flood damage) from happening, and whenever bad things do happen, then to 'set things right' and solve the problem quickly. Government officeholders are potential blame makers, too: they may choose to generate blame to shift (possible) blame away from themselves – either within government or to some external blame taker. By making public accusations, potential blame makers turn into *actual blame makers* (or simply *blame makers*) – participants in a blame game who already have expressed their blame towards someone.

A lot of critics in Western democracies are 'professional blame makers'. Opposition politicians are in the business of weakening the government by blaming it for all kinds of ills, thereby hoping to overthrow the incumbent. News journalists are expected to be adversarial towards officeholders, ask inquisitorial questions and focus on fault finding. Audit offices and enquiry committees publish official reports that criticise government agencies or individual officeholders for misconduct. Spokespersons for

disaffected interest groups work daily to make protest voices against certain government policies heard as loudly as possible. Moreover, grassroots movements can emerge and expand very quickly: Individuals can use online social networks to organise virtual communities that channel and amplify blame and mobilise resistance against a particular course of action. Much of this blame making could be regarded as strategic action oriented at achieving certain goals like persuading particular audiences (e.g., voters) or officeholders to change their behaviour or their plans.[25]

Taking a discursive approach to the study of blame games means, in my view, that an analyst should pay detailed attention to how blame makers are represented in text and talk, and make inferences about the effects of particular linguistic choices. Hence, a useful entry point to understanding a government blame game might be to ask: How are blame makers named and referred to? What characteristics are attributed to them?

Strategic discursive choices in terms of categorisation devices and social actor representation affect the perception of the credibility of the blame maker and therefore also the perception of the blameworthiness of the blame taker. For example, if blame makers are represented as members of an ingroup ('us'), or as victims or heroes, then their blame attributions may seem more true. The opposite effect may be achieved by portraying blame makers as members of an outgroup ('them') or as villains. Blame makers may be omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded, or substituted in text and talk. Omission of a blame maker, for example, by agent deletion (e.g., "the government has been blamed") may modify the audience's perception of blame. Blame makers' social status and role in a particular event can be emphasised or de-emphasised in text. Blame makers may be represented as individuals, or as blaming on behalf of groups, organisations, or even countries or nations (e.g., metonymic constructions such as "Greece accuses Germany").

Blame makers may be attributed with positive characteristics that signal moral high ground, goodwill, and credibility, or negative characteristics that indicate, for example, hypocrisy, ill-will, and lack of credibility. A blame-making newswriter could be

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[25] On the other hand, of course, there are individuals who simply disagree with the government's line of policy, or do not like a particular officeholder, and express their disaffection publicly by blaming the government. This could be seen as non-strategic, affective or 'natural' blame making. Public opinion research in Western democracies has also constantly shown that large proportions of citizens are generally angry and disaffected with those vested with political power (Hay, 2007; Norris, 2011).

represented, for instance, as an 'intrepid investigative reporter' or as a 'sensationalist journalist'. Presenting the blame maker in a positive light could have an effect of making the blameworthiness of the blame taker seem truer.

Blame takers

Blame makers may choose to attribute blame to individuals, groups, institutions, categories of persons (e.g., immigrants), or abstract entities (e.g., 'capitalism').[26] In a blame game, blame takers are mainly seen as actors who can respond to blame: they are the metaphorical 'defendants' who try to prove their 'innocence' or limit the severity of (potential) punishment from blame makers and audience members, or – already preemptively – build passive resilience in the face of blame risk. They are portrayed by blame makers as having a role (or about to have a role) in a negative event, or as having bad character traits.[27]

There are *potential blame takers* who experience a blame risk because their action may harm someone's interests (e.g., a government introducing a new tax), or because they may be perceived as possessing negative traits (e.g., government press officers are known to have deceived or bullied the reporters and thereby mislead the public). Potential blame takers may engage in *anticipative blame avoidance* (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; Hood, 2011), that is, behaviour that helps to limit the blame risk before a concrete blame-generating event occurs or blame emerges. *Actual blame takers* (or simply *blame takers*) are actors who receive blame and may choose to respond either by accepting it or by engaging in *reactive blame avoidance* (Sulitzeanu-Kenan, 2006; Hood, 2011).

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[26] Many scholars maintain that blame can only be about a person because blaming essentially involves ascriptions of agency and intentionality (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). However, others point out that in the lay use of the word, people actually often 'blame' impersonal entities like natural phenomena and fate for bad outcomes. And scholars of political blame avoidance have rightly pointed out that officeholders sometimes try to shift (and succeed in shifting) blame for negative outcomes to entities such as 'European Union' or 'capitalism' (Hood, 2011; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014).
[27] Whether possessing bad character traits could warrant blame or not remains a matter of heated debate among theorists of blame. Some scholars maintain that blame is always event-focused: blaming someone essentially involves linking a bad event to a person who either caused it or failed to fulfil her obligation to prevent it from happening (Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014). Others claim that one could be blamed not only for bad deeds or outcomes, but also for bad character traits or dispositions (e.g., Sher, 2006). In my study, I take what I see as a more flexible stance, assuming that all blame attributions do not include a reference to an event.

Blame takers, both actual and potential, are usually regarded as having the desire to avoid blame. Their individual capacity to avoid blame depends on their position in the formal organisational hierarchy (e.g., top officeholders can delegate tasks that could attract blame down the line to lower level managers) and their experience, that is, how well they are socialised into the blame-related language games in their particular community of practice. Blame takers may include scapegoats, the ones to whom other blame takers try to shift blame. Clearly, 'blame taker' as a participant role in a blame game is volatile: When a blame taker makes an attempt to shift blame, she also becomes a blame maker.

Blame makers are usually expected to present some conditions or criteria that warrant blaming a concrete target. The blame taker may be described, for instance, in terms of causality (whether or not her behaviour led to a bad outcome), intentionality (whether or not the blame taker intended to cause a bad outcome), reasons (whether or not the blame taker can provide justifications for causing a bad outcome or having bad character traits), obligation (whether or not the blame taker had an obligation to avoid the bad event or a bad character trait), capacity (whether or not the blame taker had the capacity for avoiding the bad event from occurring), and character traits (whether or not the blame taker is a 'good person').

Blame seems to 'stick' more easily to some actors compared to others. Blame can be cumulative: those individuals and groups who are known to have a long track record of receiving blame may be easier to portray as being blameworthy. Social distance and involvement are salient: blame makers may find it easier to place blame on actors who are neither members of their ingroup nor the ingroup of the main audience of the blame game. In addition, the blame taker's perceived coercive power can have a deterring effect: blame maker may choose to withhold blame if the potential blame taker is likely to retaliate with serious consequences for the blame maker (e.g., those who blame the government in a totalitarian society may be incarcerated).

Governments and individual officeholders are often targets of blame because they are seen as agents who have both the obligation and capacity to avoid all kinds of problems from occurring, and, if they should occur, resolving them promptly. Moreover, government officeholders may be seen as elites, people with high social status, who are expected to abide to higher moral standards than less powerful

individuals – hence, officeholders' norm-violations may be perceived as more blameworthy. Therefore, an officeholder who tries to defend herself against blame during a conflictual encounter may sometimes try to switch her social role and present herself as a private person rather than a civil servant on duty, or switch her speaker role, claiming that she is merely acting as a 'mouthpiece' for the government.[28]

Just like blame makers, blame takers can be represented in text and talk using various discursive strategies that can elicit different persuasive effects. Hence an analyst should ask: How are blame takers named and referred to? What characteristics are attributed to them?

In terms of social actor representation (van Leeuwen, 1996, 2008), blame takers can be identified to a varying degree, thereby making blame seem either more targeted or more diffused (see also von Scheve, Zink, & Ismer, 2014). For example, blame seems clearly targeted when a blame taker is personalised and individualised – referred to by proper name of a physical person or by a singular pronoun (e.g., blame maker says 'she deserves blame' while pointing a finger at a concrete individual); blame may seem distributed and somewhat less targeted when blame takers are assimilated and collectivised, for example when proper name of an entity ('British government') or first person plural pronoun ('we') is used; and blame seems diffused when placed on categorised collective actors ('immigrants') or impersonal objectivated actors ('a report said'). Blame takers may be excluded ('the mistakes were made') from text and talk but still effectively implied in a particular context. For example, when in 2010 the newly elected British Prime Minister David Cameron spoke of "the mistakes of the past decade" that led, as he suggested, to a financial crisis in the country, he implied that the Labour government that had been in office for the past ten years deserved blame for that outcome.

Blame makers may refer to blame takers in blame-implicating ways, for example, as 'villains', 'liars', or 'perpetrators', or as members of an outgroup ('them') to distance the speaker/writer – as well as the audience – from them. Blame takers, on the other hand, may try to invite sympathy and identification from the audience, portraying themselves as members of the ingroup ('us') and avoid using blame-implicating

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[28] Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann (2003, p. 1565) describe such role switching in response to a face threatening act, and label this defensive strategy 'abrogation'.

vocabulary. Blame makers may try to foreground certain blame takers in their stories (e.g., by repeating their names), while blame avoiders may try to background themselves as actors in relation to a negative event, or substitute themselves with other social actors (scapegoats) in their counter-stories.

Blame takers may be perceived as more blameworthy when they are attributed with bad character traits ('reckless', 'foolish') and bad intentions ('devious'). Obligation and capacity to prevent certain negative events are often implied in text and talk about government actors as blame takers. Blame takers may be predicated with reasons (justifications) for behaving in certain ways or having certain character traits, thereby possibly reducing their perceived offensiveness.

Norms

Norms are socially shared understandings of what kind of patterns of behaviour, states of affairs, and character traits are, or are not acceptable in a particular group or society. Blaming involves stating explicitly or presuming tacitly that a norm has been violated. Participants in the blame game may affirm norms by citing or alluding to certain imperatives or prohibitions, and engage in arguments over which norm should override the other one.

Evaluations of wrongness or appropriateness of government's actions are often based on normative ideas about harm, fairness, and loyalty. People may have different understandings of how government should be organised, what a government or an individual officeholder should or should not do, and what constitutes a problem or a failure in government (Hood, 1998; Howlett, 2012; McConnell, 2010; Stone, 2012).

Blame makers do not always express the particular norms that guide their blaming. Analysts can uncover the underlying norms and expectations by looking at the argument put forward by a blame maker, and reconstructing the warrant – the conclusion rule that connects her evidence with the wrongness claim. The warrant is often based on commonplaces that are presumably shared with the audience. A technical term for such a content-specific warrant is *topos*. For example, if a critic advances a standpoint that the government deserves blame for discriminating against a certain group of people, the wrongness of government's action is warranted by the

topos of justice – an understanding that granting equal rights for all should be a norm.[29]

Similar, more or less evident commonplaces can be used by blame takers when they try to justify their acts. For example, when an official claims that she should not be blamed for causing a bad outcome because she followed the rules to the letter, she evokes the topos of law – a normative understanding that when a law requires doing something then it should be done in any event. Another common warrant that officeholders use to justify controversial policies is an appeal to 'greater societal fairness' (McGraw, 1990, p. 122). Hence, an analyst of a blame game should always seek an answer to the question: On what topical conclusion rules are the claims of wrongness or rightness of an event (or a character trait) based?

Events

Events are certain behaviours or outcomes, either real or alleged, that are portrayed by blame makers as violating some norm and attributed to a blame taker.

Behaviours and outcomes differ from each other in terms of how easily these could be linked to a particular blame taker as a causal agent. In case of negative *behaviour* (e.g., launching a physical attack on someone), agency is often instantly evident: there is a concrete actor or a group of actors whose concrete acts can be observed as a process by one or more people and interpreted in relation to certain expectations. In case of negative *outcomes* (e.g., an international financial crisis), agency is often less evident: one cannot observe an activity, one can only interpret the results of a process and hypothesise about its causes. Moreover, negative outcomes are less likely to attract attention "if they are spread widely rather than concentrated, and if they are diffused over time rather than delivered in a single shot" (Pierson, 1994, p. 20).

It would be, of course, impracticable to try to present a comprehensive list of every imaginable event that could be represented by someone as violating a norm. Blame attributions in government blame game may include descriptions of government actors doing something bad (e.g., abusing official power, mismanaging finances, lying),

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[29] I will return to the notion of *topos* and the importance of identifying topic specific argumentation schemes for the study of blame/avoidance in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. See also Reisigl & Wodak (2001) and Reisigl (2014).

taking something good away (e.g., cutting pensions, limiting freedoms), not doing something good (e.g., failing to achieve a policy goal preferred by the blame maker), or not preventing something bad from happening (e.g., increase in violent crime). Notably, omissions to act are generally more difficult to detect, because there is no behaviour that can be observed and evaluated.

In government blame games, events are often past or ongoing acts (including attempts) that – according to blame makers – constitute or bring about norm violations. However, blame may be placed on someone for (allegedly) planning to do or being likely to do something bad in the future, due to, for instance, bad intentions or incompetence. Arguably, blaming has more persuasive force if one can present evidence of bad events which have already taken place or which can be observed as an ongoing process. Persuasive blaming may thus involve attempts at modifying the audience's perceptions of risk – their assessments of the severity of attempted harms and the likelihood of negative events in the future. Blame avoiders may try to manipulate the temporal perspective of the audience so that the event in question seems to have occurred a long time ago, assuming that a distant past event may be perceived as less offensive. Another temporal perspective-shifting discursive move, called 'differentiation' (Ware & Linkugel, 1973), involves inviting the audience to imagine looking back at the (seemingly) negative event from the future to recognise that it actually has beneficial effects in the long run.

Different norm-violating events may have a widely varying social impact (or magnitude), ranging from relatively minor personal inappropriate acts with little effect on society to large-scale institutional violations imposing major social costs (Entman, 2012). Blame makers may try to use linguistic resources to foreground and intensify the negative impact of an event in their accounts, while blame takers often try to mitigate the impact or omit the event altogether. One common way of doing this is by comparing the event in question with some other event. For instance, a blame maker may suggest that a problematic situation that has emerged due to the inaction of the current government has negatively affected more people than a well-known historical crisis. Blame-avoiding officeholders, on the other hand, may use comparisons to past problems, bad circumstances of other social groups, or hypothetical 'worst-case' scenarios to make the current event seem more tolerable (McGraw, 1990, p. 122).

Offensive acts may be represented by blame makers as intentional and perhaps even as defining characteristics of a particular blame taker. The blame taker may try to counter such representations by claiming that the negative event had a mechanical, inadvertent, or accidental cause (Stone, 2012). As Goffman (2010, p. 112) puts it, "the more an actor can argue mitigating circumstances successfully, the more he can establish that the act is not to be taken as an expression of his moral character; contrarily, the more he is held responsible for his act, the more fully it will define him for others". A single negative event may be more easily depicted as incidental, while repeated violations may be regarded as warranting more blame. An event may also seem to warrant more blame when it involves violations of several norms at once (e.g., an officeholder lies to hide government waste).

From a discursive point of view, an analyst should ask: How are events referred to? How are the negative or positive aspects of the events intensified or mitigated?

In stories about blame, events – or certain elements of events – may be strategically omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded, substituted, rearranged, or added. For example, potential blame takers may omit from their stories any references to victims and the inflicted harm or loss, or start talking about a completely different event that is less controversial and less likely to attract blame. In terms of social action representation (van Leeuwen, 2008), events can be portrayed dynamically as processes, or statically as entities or qualities: the static portrayal may have an effect of backgrounding human agency and reducing the perception of blame. Blame makers often try to represent negative events vividly, provide accounts and imagery that are rich in detail, and use superlatives and appeals to threat to stir the emotions of the audience. Blame takers, on the contrary, may refer to problematic events as routine occurrences, as 'business as usual', and provide abstract, general accounts to downplay their significance.

Events can be referred to using lexis that signals their negativity or positivity: for example, a blame maker may call an outcome a 'crisis' while a blame taker refers to the same outcome as an 'achievement'. Evaluative terms that are used to refer to norm-violating behaviours include, for example, 'violation', 'offence', 'transgression', and 'wrongdoing'. Evaluative terms that are used to refer to norm-violating outcomes include, for example, 'problem', 'failure', 'fiasco', 'disaster', 'crisis', 'damage',

'harm', and 'loss'. Similarly, evaluations may be expressed with adjectives such as 'scandalous' or 'commendable'. Events can be referred to using lexis that signals limited intentionality or capacity of the causal agent, such as 'accident', 'unfortunate incident', or 'misunderstanding'.

Audiences

Audiences are individuals or groups who observe the blame game and who are expected to respond to blaming in some way. Audiences may include addressees (i.e., people to whom a particular utterance, text, or image is directed) as well as hearers, readers, or viewers who are unaddressed (Goffman, 1974).

Both blame makers and blame takers try to persuade particular audiences to side with their position on a question of blame at hand, that is, to influence the audiences' blame attributing decisions and loyalties. If persuaded by blame makers, audiences can also become blame makers. If persuaded by blame takers, audiences may ignore the blame attacks, or turn against blame makers, perhaps forcing them to stop generating further blame.

In the political field, audiences usually include groups of citizens who can potentially punish the incumbent government at the elections. Public blame games often have multiple audiences with varying expectations, blaming motivations, and capabilities of penalising the blame taker. The size and other characteristics of audience(s) depend on what kind of media is used as the stage for the blame game. For example, a confrontational statement on a small local radio station may be heard by a rather limited number of like-minded people, while a critical article in a major international newspaper reaches a vast and varied readership. Knowledge of the existing 'common knowledge' and loyalties held by particular audiences is a vital resource for the players in the blame game. Blame makers, for example, may seek out and address a particular 'negatively oriented audience' (Adut, 2008) to build up a scandal around some issue (e.g., ultranationalist opposition politicians exploiting audiences with xenophobic predispositions to systematically blame the government for not curbing immigration).

Audiences may be named and referred to linguistically in a variety of ways and with different persuasive effects. Observers may be omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded,

substituted, or added in stories about government-related blame. They may be represented, for example, as victims of the blame taker (e.g., suffering harm or loss due to government action), as in-group members (e.g., 'us') of either blame makers or (potential) blame takers, as voters (evoking the idea that they can 'punish' or support the incumbent government at elections), or as customers (evoking the idea that they have a right to blame the government for providing poor service). Moreover, players in the blame game may use language in ways that are designed for particular audiences (for the concept of 'audience design', see Bell, 1984). Both blame makers and blame takers may try to charm the audience by praising and flattering them. They may try to appeal to several audiences at the same time by producing text and talk that is 'calculatedly ambivalent' (Engel & Wodak, 2013), i.e., designed to convey different meanings to different groups simultaneously. Therefore, an analyst should investigate: How are the audiences of blame games constructed and represented?

Contexts

Contexts can be understood as situational, institutional, and socio-historical circumstances of blaming and avoiding blame, and their variable combinations that could affect any aspect of the blame game.

Context of interaction is not an objective state, it is better conceptualised as a temporal sequence of changing states, experienced by participants (van Dijk, 2008, p. 17). These experiences include what was done, said, or written before and after a particular moment (i.e., previous and subsequent acts and texts) and a subjective sense of socially constructed limits (e.g., what can or cannot be said or done at a certain moment). How people understand the properties of communicative situations, such as the status and power of the participants, varies according to their epistemic groups, that is, the collectives with which they share particular systems of social beliefs (van Dijk, 2014, p. 147).

For example, a salient situational feature of the blame game is whether the players – blame makers and blame takers – engage in *face-to-face* synchronic interaction or *mediated* (usually diachronic) exchanges. Face-to-face synchronic episodes of the blame game take the form of confrontational encounters: for example, journalistic interviews with top officeholders, or Prime Minister's Questions in the British Parliament. In such settings, the blame game unfolds in a predetermined and relatively

short timeframe, just like a football match. The players can take turns and respond to each other's moves – attacks or defences – often within seconds. However, more often, blame makers do not confront a blame taker: accusations are voiced from a distance in terms of both time and space. Examples of this include newspaper articles, online postings, and public speeches where blame makers try to win an audience to their side, and where the 'defendant' usually has no possibility to provide an instant response to the attack.

An example of an institutional contextual variable is the extent to which particular players in the blame game can *control the information* that could influence the course of the game. Government actors may be able to limit the visibility (and public knowledge) of certain backstage behaviours and outcomes that could potentially attract blame. Institutional hierarchies and *formal systems of delegation* both enable and limit the actors' possibilities for placing and deflecting blame. For instance, it is often much easier for the leaders to pass blame for wrongdoings down to their subordinates (Mitchell, 2012).

Socio-historical circumstances include a wide range of social and temporal variables that may provide or limit possibilities for blaming: long-standing conflicts between groups and entrenched loyalties within groups in society, growing social injustice, economic recessions, wars, natural and man-made disasters, and so forth. One instrument that is commonly used to contextualise blame games are the results of various public opinion polls. The poll figures are taken to indicate at any particular time how favourable or unfavourable attitudes certain segments of the population have towards the ruling parties, the government, their leaders, and their policies.

With respect to the UK, some of the historical contextual information necessary for understanding attitudes towards government/communication during the rule of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition include the following (Sanders, 2013; Taylor-Gooby & Stoker, 2011):

- Due to Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, the two main parties had been struggling for power since the 1920s: the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. The latter suffered from a hostile press while being in opposition from 1979 to 1997. The British newspapers enjoy a large readership and have a considerable agenda-setting power. The reporting of politics in the British

press tends to be strongly adversarial and highly partisan, usually reflecting the competition between the two major political parties.

- After forming a government in 1997, the Labour Party with Tony Blair as Prime Minister, engaged in aggressive news management to win public approval. However, Blair's government actually received public criticism for its 'spin doctoring' and overly orchestrated and expensive government marketing campaigns.

- When Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron came to power as head of the coalition government in 2010, the UK economy was in recession and the government faced the largest budget deficit since the Second World War. The coalition government announced a substantial programme of public spending cuts and tax increases from 2010 to 2015. It also announced major reforms that included restructuring of state services, involving significant transfers of tasks from the state to the private sector. As a part of the broader reform, the official marketing and advertising campaigns were frozen and the communication staff reorganised, probably to distance the new government from the 'spin' and overspending scandals of the previous administration.

- The Conservatives have tended to blame civil servants for impeding the overall change agenda of the government (Pyper, 2013). Notably, British government departments (ministries) are staffed at the highest level by civil servants who are expected to respect the civil service's ethos of political neutrality. This requirement applies to communication professionals employed by the departments.

The basic guiding questions that may help to bring some of these features into a discursive analysis of the blame game include: Which contextual features are omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded, substituted, or added in stories about government-related blame? How do the various contextual variables of the blame game interact with what the players (can) do?

Moves

Moves are actions and reactions undertaken by blame makers and blame takers – and sometimes also by the audience – in relation to a blame game. The moves are often represented in military terms as *attacks* or *defences* that are based on 'strategies' –

goal-oriented and more or less planned ways of generating or avoiding/mitigating blame. The sequences of moves or episodes in a blame game can be described, for example, as 'strategic manoeuvring', 'outflanking', or 'staged retreating'. Moves are accomplished by drawing on various resources described above: using discursive strategies, exploiting the affordances of the media, and manipulating political variables. The discursive portrayal of moves unfolding in time forms the narrative 'plot' of the game.

A stereotypical sequence of moves involves an action followed by a reaction: a blame maker establishing a causal link between a blame taker and a norm-violating event (e.g., a newspaper article blaming the government for wasting money) and the blame taker responding in some calculated way (e.g., government officeholders publishing a news release claiming that they have actually saved money). Both players may employ specific linguistic devices, tell particular causal stories, and often react decisively to the coverage of the 'game' in the media to sway the audience. Blame takers may try to 'restore their image' after a blame attack by denying, evading responsibility, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, or mortification (Benoit, 1995). However, moves of anticipative blame avoidance are carried out before a blame maker has made her move. This may involve, for example, intimidating or distracting the potential blame maker so that she would withhold blame, and limiting the visibility of potentially blame-inducing events. Blame-avoiding moves may have specific targets, for example, one could distinguish between opposition-oriented moves that are aimed at reducing their motivation to generate blame, and voter-oriented moves which aim to avoid electoral mobilisation against the government (Hering, 2008).

Unlike chess or football, the government blame games do not incorporate formal and universal 'rules of the game' that all of the players are obliged to follow when making their moves. However, as suggested above, the moves are both enabled and constrained by the subjectively perceived contexts of the players in the game: they possess (often habitually acquired and tacit) 'know-how' as to what can or should be done in particular situations. Players tend to make moves that seem to have 'worked well' in a similar situation before. However, the 'rules' regarding the acceptability of particular moves may be discursively constructed or modified by the participants as the game progresses. For example, a concrete move, such as shifting blame to a

subordinate, may be represented by a blame maker as a norm-violating event that may then become perceived by the audience as a new focal element of the blame game.

Guiding questions for analysing a story about a blame game may include: How are moves in the blame game referred to linguistically? Are certain moves omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded, or substituted? What characteristics are attributed to these moves (e.g., good, bad, clever, evil)?

Outcomes

How are the purposes and results of the blame game referred to and evaluated? How are links constructed between particular moves by the players and the overall outcome of the blame game?

When blaming and avoiding blame is described in terms of a game metaphor, it is presumed that there should be winners and losers. Hence, one of the typical ways to talk about the outcomes would be to focus on who benefits and who is worse off as a result of a blame game. For example, in the field of party politics, one might expound on how the blame game has influenced the voters' choices at elections: Have the incumbents been voted out of office, perhaps, due to a string of scandals they were involved in? A broader question to ask could be: How have the relationships between certain individuals or groups changed as a result of the blame game?

At the individual level, receiving blame may lead to a variety of consequences for a blame taker, ranging "from mild social embarrassment to deep shame or extreme legal sanctions involving loss of life or liberty" (Hood, 2011, p. 7). In government, blaming may come to an end when an officeholder resigns or is expelled from her post. An individual blame maker who suffered due to the (in)action of the officeholder, may receive an apology and some kind of compensation, and may express forgiveness to the offender.

At the group and societal level, blaming and avoiding blame can be conceptualised as essential elements of political struggles – as strategic activities aimed at certain outcomes. Stone (1989, p. 295) identifies four 'political functions' of causal stories that, in my view, succinctly describe the possible broader outcomes of government blame games. Causal stories can be used to

- either challenge or protect an existing social order;
- assign responsibility to particular political actors so that someone will have to stop an activity, do it differently, compensate its victims, or possibly face punishment;
- legitimise and empower particular actors as 'fixers' of the problem;
- create new political alliances among people who are shown to stand in the same victim relationship to the causal agent.

Some typical outcomes include corrective action on the side of the blame taker (e.g., compensation provided to victims), forgiveness on the side of the blame maker, and legitimation or delegitimation of the players' actions in the audience's eyes. Over time, large-scale political scandals may undermine the overall trust in politics and public administration (Thompson, 2000). A related – but perhaps less obvious – outcome is the further expansion and elaboration of blame avoidance behaviour in government. This may involve reorganising the work of the government (e.g., depoliticising certain decisions) and more sophisticated masking of the problematic aspects of officeholders' behaviour. Such masking may inhibit reasonable public debate about people's grievances, and block self-reflective learning from past mistakes, which, in turn, can lead to an increased risk of causing more harm and loss in the future (Hood, 2011).

Metadiscourses

If we understand the government blame game as a discursive practice, then the term *metadiscourses* may be used to refer to the ways people talk and write about the 'blame game'. The very text you are currently reading is a handy example of this. However, participants and observers of interactions that involve blaming also sometimes voice self-referential reflections, identifying themselves manifestly as players or witnesses of a 'blame game'.

Hence, an analyst might ask: Do speakers/writers refer to the 'blame game'? Do they identify themselves as participants or observers of a blame game? What stance do they express towards the 'blame game'?

Producing metadiscourse on government blame game entails acknowledging one's adoption of the *game frame*. This can have various effects on the general understanding of the situation, and the perception of the blame taker's

blameworthiness. By evoking the game frame, the speaker/writer draws the attention to the moves and characterisations of individual political actors, suggests that the actors should be ultimately divided into winners and losers, and therefore the focus may shift away from substantial (political) issues (Aalberg, Strömbäck, & de Vreese, 2012). The blame taker may try to present herself as a 'victim of the blame game', perhaps suggesting that blaming is an unsubstantiated character attack rather than a serious trial over a real transgression. This move relies in part on the assumption that the term 'blame game' carries an essentially negative meaning for many people (e.g., see Malle, Guglielmo, & Monroe, 2014; Olson, 2000; Young, 2011), therefore making it feasible for blame-avoiding officeholders, at least in front of certain audiences, to blame the blame makers for starting and sustaining the 'game'. Moreover, talking of politics mainly as of 'playing a game' seems to relativise the seriousness of 'political' issues in general and call into question their profound effects on people's wellbeing.

3.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have attempted to develop a general practical framework for interpreting government blame games as discursive practices. Blame games can be seen as stories consisting of certain typical components, each of which can be represented in text and talk in a variety of ways, leading to different understandings of reality. To construct a handy discursive guide for the scholars of the politics of blame/avoidance in democratic societies, I briefly described nine of such components.

Unlike much of the existing political science literature on government blame games, I am advocating the kind of empirical bottom-up analysis that is rooted in symbolic interactionist sociology, and where the starting point is linguistic detail. In particular, I accentuate the need to interpret the particular ways blame phenomena are talked and written about, and to identify in each and every instance the discursive strategies that are used to attribute blame, avoid blame, or take sides in the 'blame game'. In the spirit of discourse-historical studies, I suggest that analysts of blame games should move abductively between several levels of analysis, and bring together conceptual tools and insights from linguistics, sociology of media, and political science.

Having described my overall approach to blame games, in the following chapters I focus specifically on exploring ways of spotting and interpreting defensive discursive

moves used by government officeholders in such games: discursive strategies of blame avoidance.

4. Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government: A framework for analysis[30]

4.1 Linguistic approaches to blame avoidance

Several discourse analysts and cognitive linguists have explicated instances and means of blaming and blame avoidance in political and bureaucratic communication. As a good general starting point, Wodak (2006a) provides a concise overview of linguistic/pragmatic approaches to blaming and its frequent complementary speech act, denying. Blaming as a constitutive feature of conflict talk can be analysed by using a variety of methodologies suitable to the particular genre and context. These approaches include, for instance, speech act theory, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, argumentation analysis, and rhetoric.

In political debates and persuasive discourses, blaming and denying are strategically planned and serve positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Thus this domain is of particular interest to discourse and argumentation analysts, who focus on strategies of blaming and denying and argumentative moves in conflict talk (see Wodak, 2006a, pp. 59-61).

Ways of arguing

When faced with blame risk in a public debate situation, for instance, a televised interview or a parliamentary discussion, officeholders use particular ways of arguing designed to convince the audience that they should not be regarded as being blameworthy. Essentially this involves making argumentative moves to manipulate (a) the perception of *loss* by proposing that there is little or no reason to blame anyone because little or no harm has been done, and (b) the perception of *agency* by proposing that harm has been done either unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily, or by someone else.

The last mentioned move – shifting of responsibility and thus also blame – is particularly salient in political argumentation. This has been described by Wodak

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[30] An earlier version of this chapter has been published in *Discourse & Society* (Hansson, 2015a).

(2011) as one of the leitmotifs of 'politics as usual' in the context of European Parliament, where parliamentarians use "the highlighting of mistakes and failures of the [European] Commission which are constructed as an obstacle to reasonable decision-making" (p. 132). In a rather similar vein, in their analysis of the UK government's argumentative discourse, Fairclough and Fairclough (2012) argue that "the past and current governments have been for some time now engaged in a 'blame game'" and that the present UK coalition "has exploited and reinforced the public perception of the previous government as being responsible for the crisis and for the spending cuts, in order to legitimise their own position and delegitimise that of the opposition" (p.172).

These blame-shifting argumentative moves can be evaluated in terms of reasonableness based on the pragma-dialectical approach (see, for example, van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Snoeck Henkemans, 1996, p. 274-311). Attempts to shift blame may involve using pseudo-argumentative backing of claims or argumentative fallacies that neglect certain premises of rational discussion.[31] Such fallacies include, for instance, shifting of responsibility (*trajectio in alium*), attacking opponent's character to discredit her (*argumentum ad hominem*), misrepresenting opponent's position ('straw man'), concluding that a proposition is true because many people believe so (*argumentum ad populum*), appealing to audience's feelings of compassion (*argumentum ad misericordiam*), providing false analogies, claiming that temporal sequence equals causality (*post hoc, ergo propter hoc*), and using unclear, ambiguous or unfamiliar language.

Moreover, blame deflecting argumentation is often characterised by the use of certain topic specific conclusion rules or *topoi*. Topoi are quasi-argumentative shortcuts, content-related warrants that connect argument(s) with the claim, but the plausibility of which can be relatively easily questioned (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 74-80). In political communication, topoi are mostly

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[31] The pragma-dialectical rules for a reasonable discussion are listed in Appendix B. It should be noted that reasonable debate – as well as reflective thinking – cannot be always expected in the public sphere. The preeminent role of unconscious reasoning, emotions and affect in political communication is emphasised, for instance, in psychological and cognitive linguistics approaches by Westen (2007) and Lakoff (2008).

applied to justify and legitimise positions by providing 'common-places', instead of substantial evidence (for example, 'something is a burden, a threat, costs too much', and so forth). In this way, other groups or positions are constructed as scapegoats; they are blamed for trouble or for causing potential failure or discontent (with politics, with the European Union, etc.). (Wodak, 2011, p. 43)

For example, officeholders often reject blame for causing certain harm by claiming that they "just followed the rules" when the harm occurred. In doing so, they are applying the *topos of law* – that is, a conclusion rule that (implicitly) says that "if a law or otherwise codified norm prescribes or forbids a specific politico-administrative action, the action has to be performed or omitted" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 79). Put simply, public servants thus suggest that the harm in question has "happened" involuntarily – and if someone should be held responsible for this harm at all, then these are the legislators who established those rules.

Paying due attention to argumentation strategies is vital for any analysis of executive officials' attempts to avoid blame risk (and hence I will expand on this in Chapter 5). However, for a more comprehensive understanding of blame games, one has to look beyond that.

Ways of framing

Cognitive linguist George Lakoff (2008) reminds us that our thinking is not universally rational: the human brain does not naturally produce conscious, universal, disembodied, logical, unemotional, value-neutral, interest-based and literal reasoning.[32] Thus it is useful to analyse the discursive means of blame avoidance in executive government not only in terms of rational discussion and argumentation but by giving due consideration to reflexive modes of reasoning and the related strategies of predominantly emotional persuasion.

People often attribute blame – as well as praise – in terms of a basic narrative frame that Lakoff (2008, p. 24) calls 'Rescue narrative'. According to this narrative frame,

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[32] Lakoff (2008) claims that about 98 percent of reasoning is unconscious and reflexive (i.e., automatic and uncontrolled) and is based on conceptual frames, metaphors, and cultural narratives in which emotion is central.

an (inherently evil) Villain harms a (helpless and innocent) Victim, then an (inherently good) Hero struggles against and defeats the Villain, so consequently the Victim is rescued, the Villain is punished, and the Hero is rewarded.[33] Accordingly, avoiding blame means avoiding being depicted as a Villain in stories about (possible) harm or loss. That is why officeholders who confront a blame risk may promptly try to describe themselves as the Heroes, or the Helpers of a Hero, or perhaps even one of the Victims – only to escape being assigned the role of the Villain by someone else in their narrative account of the possibly blameworthy event or outcome.

Lakoff (2008, pp. 163-167) also describes another frame which is typically used in politics and other institutional contexts to shift blame inside an organisation. He calls it 'the Bad Apple frame', as it is based on the proverb "One bad apple spoils the barrel" which evokes a simple moral: get rid of a bad apple and the barrel will be saved. Lakoff argues that we interpret the proverb in terms of metaphors: apples are people, barrel is an organisation (container) containing people, people in the organisation are good (moral), and one or a few bad (immoral) people in an otherwise fine organisation can make others go bad (or look bad) and spoil the good name of the organisation.

> There is a systematic practice in an organisation that is either illegal, immoral, or at least underhanded. If the practice were publicly recognised, it would greatly harm the reputation of the organisation and threaten the careers of high-level members of the organisation. There are two related uses of the Bad Apple frame:
>
> 1. To protect the organisation and its mode of operation. The Bad Apple goes; the organisation is redeemed and keeps operating as before.
>
> 2. To find a target in the organisation to blame so that everyone else in the organisation escapes the blame. (Lakoff, 2008, p. 164)

According to Lakoff, this frame works not only because we think in terms of conceptual metaphors like Morality is Purity and Immorality is (possibly contagious) Rottenness, but also because it fits the Hero-Villain narrative where "the Villain is a person, not a system, an institution, or an ideology" (Lakoff, 2008, p. 166). Thus

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[33] Such formulaic use of character types was famously highlighted by Vladimir Propp (1928/1968) in his study of narrative structures of folktales.

institutions frequently respond to accusations by convicting a person rather than by changing their dominant beliefs or their possibly flawed system of operation.

However, besides spelling out the use of certain persuasive argumentation schemes and frames, critical analysis of blame avoidance should specifically incorporate a sophisticated understanding of denial strategies.

Ways of denying

Conversation analysts regard rejection as the preferred mode of reaction to blaming (Pomerantz, 1978). Rejection of accusations may take various forms. Van Dijk (1992, p. 92) has proposed a useful general typology of denying as a part of a general 'social defence' strategy against the formation of negative self- or ingroup impressions. These types are:

- act-denial ("I did not do/say that at all");
- control-denial ("I did not do/say that on purpose", "It was an accident");
- intention-denial ("I did not mean that", "You got me wrong");
- goal-denial ("I did not do/say that, in order to…");
- mitigations, downtoning, minimising or using euphemisms when describing one's negative actions.

Van Dijk notes that besides 'denial proper' there are cognitive and social strategies which can be regarded as 'stronger forms of denial': blaming the victim and reversal. This kind of defensive reaction has also been described as 'turning the tables', for instance, in Wodak's (1991) critical analysis of antisemitic language use.

Like some argumentative moves, most of these types of denying are aimed at altering the perception of the blame taker's agency. In the complex and uncertain world of public administration, intention denials may be particularly effective, because in many cases it may seem almost impossible for accusers to provide actual evidence that certain people in the government had negative intentions.

But denying may not always be the best way of doing away with perceptions of loss. Officeholders may find it even more appealing to choose simply not to mention possibly problematic issues at all or, when compelled to talk about certain actors or actions, to make such lexical choices that effectively disguise them.

Ways of representing actors and actions

The network of social actor representation, devised by van Leeuwen (1996, 2008), is yet another instrument for explicating instances of blame avoidance in text and talk. Such an approach is helpful because it leads analysts to focus their attention on exclusion, suppression or backgrounding (e.g., by impersonalisation or nominalisation) of victims and/or those actors who could possibly attract blame.

Obscured agency as a linguistic means of blame risk avoidance is notoriously common in government texts. Just to mention one observation, in an analysis of news releases of a US government institution, Scollon (2008) concludes that in these texts "it is linguistically problematical to know who is taking responsibility for the statements being made" as these "present a rather ambiguous array of writer/reader positions" (Scollon, 2008, p. 109).

Vagueness is also salient in policy papers, which are often designed by officeholders with an implicit goal of avoiding personal or institutional blame risks. Thus they may choose not to refer to possibly threatening situations or actions, or to refer to them obliquely or by euphemism, for instance, 'pre-growth period' instead of 'economic recession' or 'workforce optimisation' instead of 'laying off people'.

Representations of social actors may be analysed in terms of how calculated ways of naming (referential or nominational strategies) are used for membership categorisation – that is, establishing 'ingroups' and 'outgroups' – and how calculated ways of attributing (predicational strategies) are used for portraying actors either as more positive or negative. Presumably, blame sticks more easily to those actors who are represented as 'others' and as possessing stereotypically negative attributes; and harm inflicted to actors who are represented as members of some negative (e.g., threatening) outgroup is less likely to generate blame.

Certain ways of talking and writing about actions may have an effect of limiting the perception of blameworthiness. Van Leeuwen (1995, 2008) usefully reminds us that actions can be deagentialised, that is, represented as if the possibly harmful action in question came about without human involvement (e.g., "the problem occurred", "the incident happened"), as if this 'simply exists' (e.g., "there is a problem"), or as if this was a natural process (e.g., "concerns are growing", "changes are coming").

Officeholders may choose to represent their actions at high levels of generality and abstractness so that it becomes less clear what they actually did or are doing (e.g., "we are tackling these issues"). And moreover, in an attempt to evade responsibility, officeholders may carefully avoid talking about their actions that have (possibly) material effects and instead switch to only describing their reactions – their mental processes that are invisible (e.g., "I am very concerned about this", "I hope that things will get better").

When officeholders hide or obfuscate blameworthy aspects in text and talk, or when they use argumentation, framing, and control-denial to reject responsibility for causing particular instances of perceived harm or failure, they (at least seem to) admit the occurrence of harm or failure. However, they may instead choose a rather different approach – taking full responsibility but trying to present events or circumstances in question in a more positive light by employing strategies of legitimation.

Ways of legitimising

Legitimation, that is, explanations and justifications of practices of specific institutions, can be characterised "as an answer to the spoken or unspoken 'why' question" (van Leeuwen, 2007, p. 94). Obviously, this definition includes explanations and justifications of possibly blameworthy actions: why did (or should) we carry out these actions (in this way)?

Responses to blaming – as well as preemptive communication of potentially unwelcome conduct – often draw upon the following 'pool' of legitimations, which van Leeuwen (2007, p. 92; based on van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999) has broadly divided into four categories:[34]

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[34] Related to the notion of legitimation is that of an 'account' which encompasses statements made by social actors to explain their "unanticipated or untoward behaviour" (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Accounts can be characterised as "linguistic devices employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry" and which are intended to "prevent conflicts from arising by verbally bridging the gap between action and expectation" (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 46). Scott and Lyman (1968) tentatively distinguish between the following types and typical modal forms of accounts: (1) excuses: appeal to accidents, appeal to defeasibility, appeal to biological drives, scapegoating; and (2) justifications: denial of injury, denial of victim, condemnation of condemners, appeal to loyalties, sad tales, self-fulfilment. Scott and Lyman are mainly concerned with vocalised accounts given in face-to-face relations, but their insights may also be useful for broader understanding of institutional discursive practices.

- *authority legitimation*: using personal references (to status and role), impersonal references (to rules), references to custom (tradition, conformity), or commendation (by expert or role model);

- *moral evaluation legitimation*: using references to value systems (evaluation, abstraction, analogies);

- *rationalisation legitimation*: using reference to the goals, uses and effects of institutionalised social action (instrumental rationalisation), or to a natural order of things (theoretical rationalisation);

- *mythopoesis*: using narratives (e.g., moral tales, cautionary tales) in which legitimate actions are rewarded and non-legitimate actions are punished.

Even though what is listed here may seem somewhat similar to argumentation strategies that I mentioned earlier, legitimations are more likely designed to end debates (for example, by imposing some kind of authority without further justification) rather than to resolve differences of opinion via critical discussion.[35] And this recognition leads me to the question of manipulation.

Ways of manipulating

Linguistic strategies of deflecting blame may amount to discursive power abuse: communicative manipulation. Criticising someone's linguistic behaviour as illegitimate manipulation rather than provision of legitimate excuses and justifications obviously requires an analyst to take an explicitly normative stance. Thus, the analyst's ability to explain in considerable detail the societal consequences of a potentially manipulative communicative event is of utmost importance.

Van Dijk (2006) has proposed a three-fold approach to understanding manipulation as a central notion in critical discourse analysis by bringing together its social, cognitive and discursive aspects. According to his framework, text and talk can be regarded as manipulative if these

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[35] Throughout his article, van Leeuwen (2007) refers to the possibilities of using the 'language of legitimation' to elicit a perception that no further argument is needed to justify particular institutional practices. Surprisingly, however, he does not establish any explicit links between his framework and the ways of normatively evaluating argumentation (e.g., pragma-dialectics or Habermasian communication ethics; for a brief summary of these approaches, see Forchtner and Tominc, 2012).

1. are used by dominant groups (e.g., governments) to (re)produce their power and to hurt the interests of less powerful groups in society;

2. are based on an explicit plan to impair or bias understanding of information (Short Term Memory-based manipulation) and formation of mental models in a way which is not in the best interest of the recipients (Episodic Memory and Social Cognition manipulation);

3. make extensive use of discursive group polarisation (i.e., positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation) and other discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients (e.g., their strong emotions or traumas, their lack of relevant knowledge, their lower status) which make the recipients less resistant to accepting beliefs and doing things they otherwise would not do. Manipulation typically involves violations of conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975/1989). For example, prolixity, irrelevance, and excessive repetition may be used calculatedly to distract or exhaust the opponent and thereby avoid dialogue and rebuttal (Hansson, 2015b).

This framework serves as a useful reminder that, when wishing to provide normative critique of any particular way public authorities try to influence public perceptions of blameworthiness, discourse analysts must decidedly look beyond its purely linguistic aspects. Therefore I turn to insights about blame avoidance in government that have been accumulated within the discipline of public administration.

4.2 Public administration approach to 'presentational' blame avoidance

Hood (2011, p. 18) provides an insightful classification of 'presentational' blame avoidance strategies that are characteristic to public administration. These involve using arguments for limiting blame (excuses) or turning blame into credit (justifications) and other methods of influencing public impressions. These strategies are based on the assumption that presentational activity will limit or deflect rather than exacerbate or attract blame. He lists the following strategies:

- *Winning the argument.* Officeholders who choose to apply this strategy try to win an argument over culpability in its own terms by offering persuasive

excuses and justifications. Officeholders may try to show there is no problem (problem denial), or, when admitting there is a problem, show that blame/agency lies elsewhere. Problem denial can take at least three forms (Hood, 2011, pp. 50-52): total problem denial, partial problem denial, and problem denial accompanied by a counter-attack.

- *Drawing a line.* Officeholders who choose to apply this strategy "come out with a preemptive apology calculated to disarm critics and attract sympathy"; "apologise early in a blame sequence", try to "defuse blame by (apparently) picking it up" (Hood, 2011, p. 54). Apologising can, in some circumstances, contribute to the positive self-presentation of an officeholder, but it can also be risky for the blame taker: apologies can be taken as confessions of guilt that invite dismissal by those higher in hierarchy, or they may lead to additional demands.

- *Changing the subject.* Officeholders who choose to apply this strategy try to create or use "diversions to avoid the spotlight of blame and shift the public agenda onto other issues" and to find "good times to bury bad news" (Hood, 2011, p. 56). Hood observes that "times when public attention can be expected to be focused on other things (such as big sports events or public holidays) can provide convenient moments for officeholders and organisations to sneak out potentially embarrassing announcements of U-turns or unpopular policies" (Hood, 2011, p. 56).

- *Keeping a low profile.* This is a more passive strategy of dealing with blame by saying as little as possible. It may take several forms (Hood, 2011, pp. 59-61): restricting information, 'lying doggo' (staying silent), and 'working behind the scenes' (using backdoor threats and inducements to fix the media agenda).

Importantly, Hood discusses the possible positive and negative societal effects of the use of presentational strategies by government institutions. He argues that the approaches based on avoiding public discussion could be seen normatively as detrimental.

A key test of the positivity or otherwise of presentational blame-avoidance strategy is how far it serves to engage the citizenry in serious argument about the merits of policy or operational choices to be made by officeholders and

organisations, and clarifies where fault lies after allegations of avoidable losses have been made. … So on that criterion we can argue that winning-the-argument approaches are broadly positive, but changing-the-subject and low-profile approaches (such as diversion tactics, nonengagement, or backdoor pressures on media) are negative. (Hood, 2011, pp. 174-175)

As noted in the previous chapter, Hood also reminds us that there are other kinds of blame avoidance strategies beyond the 'presentational' ones listed above: officeholders may preemptively distribute formal responsibility among each other and/or choose particular operating routines that make it easier to shift blame or limit personal blame risk if something bad happens.

4.3 Embracing the blame avoidance framework

Hood's blame avoidance typology, though not claiming comprehensiveness, seems to be useful for gaining a broader insight into risk aversion practices in executive government contexts. The analytic tools embedded in the discourse-historical approach can complement this by providing an operationalisation of the above-mentioned strategies through a variety of linguistic (or rhetorical or argumentative) means and micro-processes by which blame is framed, admitted, countered, or shifted by government communicators.

For instance, after identifying linguistic evidence of hidden or backgrounded agency in a government-produced text, and taking into account the specific context of situation, as well as the history of the text and the institution, an analyst can interpret the particular discursive choice in terms of whether or not it may function as a blame avoidance device in a public administration organisation – and in which ways.

In what follows, I am working abductively towards bringing these two kinds of knowledge together into a single heuristic model: typical macro-level choices of administrative blame avoidance on the one hand and the corresponding argumentative moves (fallacies, topoi, violations of the pragma-dialectical rules), frames, types of denial, ways of representing actors and actions, typical legitimations, and attempts of cognitive manipulation on the other hand. I describe the linguistic characteristics of the general discursive choices of blame avoidance in turn together with concrete

textual examples drawn mainly from my UK government communication data set. My overall heuristic model of interpreting discursive blame avoidance strategies in government is presented in the form of a matrix in Table 4.1.

Total problem denial is realised discursively as denying – "This has never happened" or "We did not do it" (act-denial). The possible blame taker may provide an inverted account of blame maker's original accusation (e.g., "We helped X" in response to "You failed to help X"). In addition, explanations may be given which involve distorting or disregarding opponents' original claims (argumentative fallacy called 'straw man'), giving an impression that there is nothing to discuss as everything is self-evident (evading the burden of proof), using unclear, ambiguous or unfamiliar language (fallacy of unclarity, fallacy of ambiguity) and attempts to rewrite history (manipulating Episodic Memory). Such a denial could be expected to exclude representations of victims and harmful acts, and to use reference to the higher status of the blame taker as a guarantee of the truthfulness of the denial (authority legitimisation).

To illustrate how a relatively complex instance of total problem denial may be interpreted within my framework, I analyse an extract from the UK Cabinet Office's news release in response to an investigative story on government overspending published in *The Times* on 9 January 2012. The story, entitled 'Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure' was significant because it constituted a well-grounded (based on the National Audit Office data) blame attack by a major newspaper on the government on an issue that was at the time at the core of its programme and thus also its collective identity. The story provoked the government to make an unusual move and issue a carefully crafted official response in the form of a Cabinet Office news release, entitled 'Eradicating waste in Whitehall saves £3.75 billion', on 11 January, 2012. The news release contained a statement by Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude (see Appendix C). Here are the first three sentences from his statement:

Table 4.1. Discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government communication

	Total problem denial	Excuses	Justifications	Problem denial + counter-attack	Drawing a line	Changing the subject	Restricting information	'Lying doggo'	Working behind the scenes
General description	Rejecting the accusation completely, denying that any harm has been done	Admitting (some of) the harm but rejecting (some of) the causal agency and intentionality	Admitting the causal agency but rejecting the harm, presenting the event (and the self) in a positive light	Rejecting the accusation completely, or giving excuses, or giving justifications – accompanied by negative other-presentation	Apologising quickly to defuse blame, often accompanied by positive self-presentation	Diverting attention; burying information; topic control; violating the maxims of relation and manner	Violating the maxim of quantity – providing less information than required for the current purposes of conversation	Opting out or opting for one-way communication	Silencing (potential) blame makers by covert coercion or inducements
Ways of arguing *Examples of related topoi and fallacies*	Evading the burden of proof Straw man	*Ad misericordiam*: playing on feelings of compassion *Ad populum*: playing on audience's emotions *Topos* of ignorance	*Ad verecundiam*: parading one's own qualities *Ad populum* False analogy *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* 'Yes-but' figure *Topos* of threat *Topos* of law	*Trajectio in alium*: victim-victimiser reversal, 'turning the tables' *Ad hominem* *Ad baculum* False analogy *Post hoc, ergo propter hoc* *Topos* of threat	Evading the burden of proof *Ad misericordiam* *Ad verecundiam* *Ignoratio elenchi*: irrelevant argumentation *Ad populum*	*Ignoratio elenchi*: irrelevant argumentation Straw man 'Yes-but' figure	*Topos* of law		*Ad baculum* *Ad hominem* *Topos* of law
Examples of pragma-dialectical rules that are more likely to be violated	Obligation to give reasons Correct reference to previous discourse by the antagonist Respect of shared starting points	Obligation of 'matter-of-factness'	Obligation of 'matter-of-factness' Respect of shared starting points Use of plausible arguments and schemes of argumentation	Obligation of 'matter-of-factness' Use of plausible arguments and schemes of argumentation	Freedom to argue Obligation to give reasons Obligation of 'matter-of-factness'	Obligation of 'matter-of-factness' Correct reference to previous discourse by the antagonist	Freedom to argue Obligation to give reasons	Freedom to argue Obligation to give reasons	Freedom to argue

	Total problem denial	Excuses	Justifications	Problem denial + counter-attack	Drawing a line	Changing the subject	Restricting information	'Lying doggo'	Working behind the scenes
Ways of framing *Examples of related frames*		Rescue narrative The Bad Apple	Rescue narrative	Rescue narrative The Bad Apple	Rescue narrative The Bad Apple				
Ways of denying *Examples of related types of denial*	Act-denial	Control-denial Intention-denial Goal-denial Mitigating	Intention-denial Goal-denial Mitigating	Control-denial Intention-denial Goal-denial Mitigating Blaming the victim Reversal	Intention-denial Goal-denial				
Ways of representing actors and actions *Typical intended effects on agency and loss/harm perception*	Excluding victims Deagentialising actions	Impersonalising victims Obscuring agency Deagentialising and generalising actions Switching to mental processes	Impersonalising victims Obscuring agency Switching to mental processes	Constructing out-groups (nomination) and attaching negative attributions (predication) Obscuring agency	Switching to mental processes				
Ways of legitimising *Examples of related legitimations*	Authority legitimation	Authority legitimation Rationalisation Appealing to accidents and defeasibility	Authority legitimation Moral legitimation Rationalisation Mythopoesis	Authority legitimation Moral legitimation Rationalisation Mythopoesis			Authority legitimation		
Ways of manipulating *Examples of related cognitive and discursive manipulation*	Manipulating Episodic Memory: rewriting history as the political circumstances of the moment dictate	Using discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients Manipulating Episodic Memory: rewriting history	Using discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients Manipulating Episodic Memory: rewriting history	Manipulating Episodic Memory: re-attribution of causal agency for actions in officeholder's interests Extensive use of discursive group polarisation	Coming out with a preemptive apology calculated to disarm critics and attract sympathy	Manipulating Short Term Memory-based discourse understanding	Keeping less powerful groups uninformed	Keeping less powerful groups uninformed	Inducing less powerful groups into tending to accept the arguments of the organisation

1   When we arrived in government we pledged to be ruthless in hunting down and

2   eradicating waste in Whitehall and that is precisely what we have done.

3   Just in the first ten months to last March we saved £3.75 billion - equivalent to twice

4   the budget of the Foreign Office, or to funding 200,000 nurses.

5   This has not been easy; spending hours renegotiating contracts, tackling vested

6   interests and large suppliers and cutting back on spend on consultants and

        advertising

7   does not make for glamorous or headline grabbing work.

In lines 1–2, Minister for the Cabinet Office uses the argumentative strategy of parading one's own qualities (*argumentum ad verecundiam*) by claiming that the government has fulfilled its pledge. Importantly, this sentence also implies a total act-denial: the Minister states that the government has 'eradicated waste', that is, he and his colleagues have done the opposite of 'wasting'. The Minister represents wasting not as an action carried out by his fellow officeholders but as a nominalised entity: 'waste in Whitehall'. Moreover, he diffuses blame by portraying the government metaphorically as a 'container' ("when we arrived in government...") rather than a specific group of human actors who could be held responsible. He frames 'waste' as a Villain (or perhaps as some kind of a dangerous wild animal) and the government as a Hero (perhaps a gunman) who "hunts it down" and "eradicates" it.

In lines 3–4, the Minister backs up his claim by using a particular conclusion rule, *topos of numbers*, by suggesting that a given statistical figure (£3.75 billion allegedly saved in ten months) serves as a proof that the government has not wasted money and should not be blamed. However, the Minister does not directly counter the central accusatory claim put forward by *The Times* that "more than £31 billion of taxpayers' money has been wasted across government departments in the past two years". Thus he may be seen as committing a 'straw man' fallacy and violating a pragma-dialectical rule of reasonable discussion that requires the debater to use correct reference to previous discourse by the antagonist.

In lines 5–7, the Minister represents government's activities at a high level of abstractness ("renegotiating contracts", "tackling vested interests", "cutting back on spend") thereby making it more difficult to understand the exact nature of the activities. This, in turn, may evoke a sense of mystery and awe among his audiences

and therefore function as a kind of appeal to authority. In addition, he casts the government as a selfless Hero by claiming that the work of the government 'has not been easy' nor 'glamorous'.

Excuses involve admitting the harm or loss – at least partially –, often accompanied by mitigation ("We acknowledge that there seems to be a minor problem") and giving possible reasons or explanations for the blameworthy situation. These explanations may play on audience's emotions, especially their feelings of compassion (*argumentum ad populum, argumentum ad misericordiam*), for instance by claiming that "events were beyond our control", or, that "these were unforeseeable circumstances", or claiming ignorance and victim-hood as someone suffering from an unfortunate lack of relevant information ("no one told me..."), possibly evoking the Bad Apple frame.

While admitting that harm has been done, excuses may involve various types of denial: "It was an accident" (control-denial), "You have misunderstood us" (intention-denial), "We did not do that, in order to cause this..." (goal-denial). Officeholders may attempt to obscure agency ("It appears that some damage has been caused") and impersonalise the victims ("This country suffers from..."). Excuses do not involve explicit expressions of the acceptance of blame and are thus clearly distinct from apologies (for some characteristics of political apologies, see Harris, Grainger, & Mullany, 2006).

To illustrate an analysis of an excuse, I use a short extract from a prominent newspaper article that came out at a time when the recent financial crisis in the UK became most acute. On 8 October 2008, the UK government announced a major package to support the banking sector, up to an aggregate total of £500 billion in loans and guarantees. Two days later, the Prime Minister and Labour Party leader Gordon Brown published an article titled "We Must Lead the World to Financial Stability" in *The Times,* where he justified the bank rescue plan of his government, but also argued that his government cannot take full responsibility for solving the crisis in the UK – and thus should not be blamed. Brown writes:

1   When I became Prime Minister I did not expect to make the decision,
2   along with Alistair Darling,

3 for the Government to offer to take stakes in our high street banks,

4 just as nobody could have anticipated the action taken in America.

Here, Brown's argumentative shortcut to concluding that the UK government should not be blamed could be called *topos of ignorance* and explicated as follows: "If a threat is unforeseeable, then those who failed to foresee it and take precautions should not be blamed". Brown uses *ad populum* argumentation in line 4 by claiming that "nobody" could have predicted the need to rescue high street banks in the UK and US. He somewhat diffuses possible personal blame by mentioning one of the members of his Cabinet, Alistair Darling (line 2), who was responsible for economic and financial matters of his government, and referring to "America" as another country where the government had supposedly taken similar actions. Brown thus realises his excuse mainly by representing the financial troubles in the UK as completely unforeseeable and beyond his complete control.

Justifications essentially involve positive self-presentation by trying to turn blame into credit: "What the media describes as a failure is actually a major victory" or "We had to make some difficult decisions which will lead to gains in the future". The related argumentation may be based on parading one's own qualities (*argumentum ad verecundiam*), playing on the audience's emotions (*argumentum ad populum*), and the use of inappropriate argumentation schemes or the incorrect application of argumentation schemes (e.g., false analogies; *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy). Moreover, possible blame takers may evoke a 'Rescue narrative' frame and cast themselves within that frame as Heroes or Helpers.

Justifications may include various types of denial, apparently with an exception of control-denial: the blame taker usually claims responsibility for the actions or events that are presented as positive. Still, the blame takers may attempt to obscure agency and to present the victims as winners ("The economy cannot be fixed overnight but we will restore optimism and hope"). Justifications could also make use of the full range of legitimations, based on authority ("We proceeded according to the law adopted by the Parliament"), moral evaluation ("Our actions are based on Britain's values"), rationalisation ("This helps to get our economy back on its feet"), and mythopoesis (e.g., telling a cautionary story what could have happened if a particular decision had not been made).

To illustrate how justifications could be analysed within this blame avoidance framework, I use another extract from the same Prime Minister Gordon Brown's article (published in *The Times* on 10 October 2008) where he justified the bank rescue plan of his government. Here are the first three sentences from his article:

1   The banking system is fundamental to everything we do.
2   Every family and every business in Britain depends upon it.
3   That is why, when threatened by the global financial turmoil
4   that started in America and has now spread across the world,
5   we in Britain took action to secure our banks and financial system.

In terms of argumentation, Brown presents government's decision to support banks as unquestionably necessary, using field-dependent warrants that are backed up by the presumedly common knowledge that "the banking system is fundamental to everything we do" (line 1). I suggest that the specific warrants in use here may be called *the topos of threat to the banks* ("if banks have problems then it poses a threat to everybody and one should do something to secure the banks") and *the topos of government as a protector* ("if threats to everybody emerge then the government should do something to protect the people against them").

In terms of representation, Brown describes banks as influential agents that are central to and essentially 'good' for the society as a whole. He uses 'banking' as a general term; no distinction is made between banks acting within real economy (e.g., financial intermediation, insurance) and banks engaged in speculative/fictitious transactions. "Global financial turmoil" is represented as an agent that threatens the UK (line 3). In terms of framing, such representation implies that the people and the banks in the UK should be seen as victims of that (abstract) turmoil. "America" is referred to as the origin of the crisis, thus externalising the cause of the crisis (line 4). "Global" and "spread across the world" are used to suggest that the problems are universal and not specific to the UK. The use of "we in Britain" (line 5) evokes a comparison or opposition between the UK and (supposedly) all the other countries in the world.

Thus, from the outset, Brown establishes a typical dramatic frame that implies that there is a Villain (global financial turmoil from America) who threatens the Victims (families, businesses, and banks in the UK), and a Hero (UK government) who takes action to defend the Victims. This frame (or dramatic plot) is clearly in service of the

positive self-presentation of the government and used to mitigate possible blame for either causing or not sufficiently alleviating the financial crisis.

Problem denial + **counter-attack** may involve justifications or excuses (as described above) accompanied by negative other-presentation. The argumentation could be based on victim-victimiser reversal (*trajectio in alium*), discrediting opponent (*argumentum ad hominem*), threatening the opponent (*argumentum ad baculum*), and symptomatic argumentation applied to shift blame (e.g., *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* fallacy). Blame takers could try to relativise and trivialise the problem through the use of (possibly fallacious) comparisons or equating strategies: "This is how all governments have dealt with the issue" or "Yes, we made a mistake, but other institutions failed, too".[36] Officeholders may try to cast themselves as Victims within a 'Rescue narrative' frame by claiming that their (possibly blameworthy) action serves the goal of self-defence and pointing a blaming finger at some outside actor as a Villain. Also, the Bad Apple frame may be evoked by referring to an alleged villain within the organisation.

All types of denial could be used, including the strongest forms: blaming the victim and victim-victimiser reversal. Nomination and predication is used strategically for constructing the blame makers as an out-group and for attaching negative attributions to them ("We are victims of the negatively biased media coverage"). Systematic re-attribution of responsibility of actions in officeholders' interest can be interpreted as an attempt to manipulate audience's episodic memory.

To illustrate how to analyse instances where problem denial is put in action in conjunction with negative other-presentation, I examine another extract from the UK Cabinet Office's news release in response to the article entitled 'Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure'. In his statement, Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude says:

1   And I am not alone in highlighting all the good work we have done so far;

2   the Public Accounts Committee recently recognised and welcomed

3   our transparent approach to savings.

---

[36] The use of 'yes-but' argumentative pattern for shifting responsibility has been highlighted by De Cillia and Wodak (2009).

4   Meanwhile other countries, especially in troubled Europe,

5   are now looking to us for how this is done.

In lines 1–3, the Minister uses *ad populum* argumentation and authority legitimation in service of positive self-presentation of the government. He supports the position that the government should be praised (or at least not blamed) for its financial conduct by claiming that a collective actor who apparently holds high status in society – a parliamentary committee – has given the government a positive evaluation. In terms of representation, Maude nominalises government's action: "our transparent approach to savings" (line 3). This nominalised construction is remarkable for its ambivalence. On the one hand, it presupposes that the government is acting transparently and is saving money – both of which are supposedly regarded as worthy of public praise rather than blame. On the other hand, it is sufficiently vague to permit an opposite interpretation: one could "have a transparent approach to savings" but actually not save any money.

In lines 4–5, the Minister juxtaposes the actions of the UK government with those of the other countries, evoking an 'Us vs Them' opposition'. The suggestion that other governments regard the UK as a positive example (or perhaps a mentor or a role model) is not supported by any data – it ultimately relies on a presumption that his audience is likely to agree with statements that reaffirm positive ingroup feelings. The perceived opposition is intensified by negative other-presentation: "troubled Europe" (line 4) is a salient linguistic construction that is based upon a presumption that the audience regards "Europe" as an outgroup (i.e., that the UK citizens do not belong to "Europe") and also implies that the UK is not financially "troubled" (problem denial). This kind of discursive triggering of group polarisation may be regarded as manipulative, if it is carried out systematically with the purpose of deflecting blame for possible financial misconduct of the government.

Drawing a line is realised as a quick acknowledgement of the problem ("Mistakes have been made") and a possibly preemptive apology, sometimes accompanied by more or less explicit positive self-presentation ("Unlike many other leaders, I am willing to acknowledge my mistakes. I apologise.").

By apologising quickly, the officeholder(s) may try to avoid further discussion, thus escaping the obligation to give reasons for their blameworthy action (the fallacy of

evading the burden of proof). The arguments used in conjunction with the apology may be chosen to play on the audience's emotions (*argumentum ad populum*) and contain claims which are irrelevant to the topic under discussion (*ignoratio elenchi*). This choice can be regarded as manipulative if it is calculated to give an appearance of moral superiority, honesty and sincerity, thus possibly disarming critics.

An attempt to draw a line may be illustrated by a recorded broadcast statement by Nick Clegg, Deputy Prime Minister and Liberal Democrat Party leader, published on YouTube on 19 September 2012 and aired on television in the UK later that month. Clegg's statement contained an apology for not keeping his party's pre-2010 election promise to oppose increasing university tuition fees. This cannot be strictly regarded as apologising early or preemptively because the controversial decision to raise the maximum university tuition fees in England from £3,375 to £9,000 per year was backed by the members of the UK parliament (including Nick Clegg and 27 other Liberal Democrats) already in December 2010. However, the fees were actually increased from September 2012 and Clegg may have tried to use that occasion as an opportunity to symbolically 'win back trust' of some disappointed citizens by seemingly leaving his blameworthy deeds behind and moving on. Here is an extract from Clegg's statement:

1   I shouldn't have committed to a policy that was so expensive

2   when there was no money around.

3   Not least when the most likely way we'd end up in Government was in coalition

4   with Labour or the Conservatives, who were both committed to put fees up.

5   I know that we fought to get the best policy we could in those circumstances.

6   But I also realise that isn't the point. There's no easy way to say this:

7   we made a pledge, we didn't stick to it – and for that I am sorry.

8   When you've made a mistake you should apologise.

9   But more importantly – most important of all –

10   you've got to learn from your mistakes.

11   And that's what we will do.

12   I will never again make a pledge unless as a party we are absolutely clear

13   about how we can keep it.

In lines 1–4, Clegg first admits to a particular fault: he acknowledges that he should not have pledged to resist any raising of student tuition fees because (a) there was

actually "no money around" (line 2) to finance that policy, and (b) the possible coalition partners opposed that policy so it was unlikely that the fees could be capped. This acknowledgement is ambivalent. On the one hand, it pertains to Clegg's pre-election misjudgement, for which he actually gives no reasons – he merely says that he should have behaved otherwise. On the other hand, it can be also interpreted as an excuse for making his current policy choices in the government as he presents two reasons for raising the tuition fees. Secondly, Clegg frames himself as a Hero who "fought to get the best policy" (line 5), thus in effect implying that the Conservatives, who resisted his policy in the coalition government, should be seen as Villains. Notably, however, Clegg does not refer to any Victims – for instance, the students who were forced to pay higher fees have been omitted from the statement. Hence an element that is often expected of a full apology – an expression of concern for all of those who suffered from the offense – is missing here.

In line 7, Clegg apologises by saying "I am sorry". However, he limits his apology to a specific component of his offence: he apologises for not keeping a promise; he does *not* apologise for supporting the decision to raise tuition fees. He does not direct his apology to those people who may feel deterred from seeking higher education because going to a university has become much more costly. In terms of social actor representation, Clegg notably switches between using first person singular and plural pronouns 'I' and 'we', which seems to make blame less targeted as it is not really clear exactly to whom 'we' may refer.

In line 8, Clegg first recites an imperative ("When you've made a mistake you should apologise") that mainly seems to serve as an indication of his moral high ground. Secondly, he asserts that is it "most important of all" to learn from one's mistakes (lines 9–10), and then claims to perform this learning by promising to refrain from the particular kind of behaviour that he claims to regret – making pledges that cannot be easily kept – in the future. However, he does not offer any compensation for the possible harm that his wrongdoing may have caused to particular people. By emphasising the importance of "learning" (that is relatively easy to do), he backgrounds the importance of compensation (which may be difficult and costly to provide). By focusing his talk on his future actions (using the future tense as in "that's what we will do" in line 11), he backgrounds his past wrongdoing. By seemingly claiming to have learned a lesson, he is appealing to his audience's emotions and tries

to give an appearance of a person with a good character and high moral standards – which ultimately is an act of positive self-presentation. Thus this statement cannot be seen as a full apology, but merely an attempt to defuse some blame and attract sympathy.

Changing the subject is realised mainly in two ways: via topic control, which may involve violations of the maxim of relation, for instance, providing distracting information which is irrelevant to the accusations, or by a manipulative strategy of making use of recipients' vulnerabilities – choosing such a time for communicating when the potential critics are most likely distracted by other actions, thus 'burying' information.

The fallacies may include provision of irrelevant arguments (*ignoratio elenchi*) and talking about unrelated problems raised by (possibly imaginary) opponents (straw man). From a cognitive point of view, changing the subject is based on manipulating Short Term Memory-based discourse understanding: the blame taker uses text and talk and imagery to draw recipient's attention to information X rather than possibly blameworthy information Y.

To illustrate the use of this blame avoidance strategy, I analyse an excerpt from a transcript of a press conference given by the UK Prime Minister David Cameron and the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg on 7 January 2013. This widely covered press conference was designed and performed by the government as part of launching its 'mid-term review' – an important self-assessment document comparing the commitments made in its programme two and a half years earlier to the policies it had actually carried out to date. The press conference was as a major proactive attempt at positive self-presentation of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. However, the format of a press conference provides the participating journalists an opportunity to directly confront the Ministers with questions that draw attention to negative and possibly blameworthy phenomena instead. Here I focus on three conversational turns that took place after both David Cameron and Nick Clegg had finished their short speeches: a journalist asks an inquisitorial question, the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg replies, and at some point the journalist interferes to repeat his question.

1   ##Question

2   This is a very nice document. Thank you for giving it to us, but I think a lot of

3   people are going to wonder what the point of it is tonight. I can tell you the one

4   thing they do want to know, which is what's going to happen to the economy this

5   year. Can you both give us a picture of where you think we are? Is a triple-dip

6   recession possible? Likely? Are you really both confident that the economy is going

7   to grow this year? If not, why not? Are you contemplating other measures if it

8   doesn't come out the way you want?

9

10   ##Deputy Prime Minister

11   The first thing I'd say is that we've been very open with the British people about

12   the fact that the time needed to get the job done, that the time needed for the

13   economy to heal fully, is taking longer than frankly anyone expected.

14   We've been very open about that.

15   We've actually said that dealing with the structural deficit, balancing the books, is

16   going to take longer.

17   We couldn't have been more open that it is going to take longer and it does mean

18   that the next parliament, the next government, will need to complete

19   the job that we have initiated, but we've made huge strides. The deficit is 25% lower.

20   Now, hang on; it's important.

21

22   ##Question

23   My question was about are you confident, both of you, that we are on the track to

24   growth.

In his first turn (lines 2–8), the journalist uses mock politeness by delivering an
obviously insincere compliment and an expression of gratitude: "This is a very nice
document. Thank you for giving it to us". He follows it up with a string of questions
about the economic forecast for the country – an issue that, as he implies, the
ministers had chosen to neglect in their presentation.

In response, the Deputy Prime Minister Clegg starts to talk at length about how 'open'
the government has been, instead of addressing the questions actually raised by the
journalist. Clegg thus instantly tries to avoid blame in this conversational situation by
committing an argumentative 'straw man' fallacy. It may be argued that the choice of
this particular manoeuvre was encouraged by the fact that the journalist asked multiple
questions at one go – the less focused is the question, the more space there seems to be

for sidestepping a straightforward reply. The repeated (in lines 11, 14, and 17) use of the word 'open' (which tends to have a generally positive connotation in discourses about government) seems to indicate that the speaker is anxious to persuade the audience that he is talking honestly. Moreover, he attempts to shift at least some of the responsibility for the economic situation in the country away from the current government by stating that "the next parliament, the next government, will need to complete the job that we have initiated" (lines 18–19), disregarding that the questions asked were about the current year.

Restricting information can be described pragmatically as a violation of the maxim of quantity: the officeholders choose not to provide certain information about issues which may attract blame (e.g., misuse of the public funds, or misconduct of public service providers) and therefore their contribution to public discussion may be seen as not as informative as required. When justifying these restrictions, officials often make use of the *topos of law* (for instance, "This information is classified under the Atomic Energy Act of 1954") and the legitimations are mainly based on authority.

As an illustration of analysis, I use another excerpt from the transcript of the press conference by David Cameron and Nick Clegg on 7 January 2013. Here, a journalist has asked them if they are both confident that the UK economy is "on the track to growth". First, the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg gives his answer and then the Prime Minister David Cameron has a turn:

1   ## Deputy Prime Minister
2   I don't think anyone should start making foolish statistical predictions about
3   what's going to happen to something as unpredictable as the global economy,
4   but we're doing the right reforms and implementing the right changes
5   to ensure that healing process continues.
6
7   ## Prime Minister
8   I'll just add - and I agree with every word of that - but I'll just add to that point that
9   we don't now make our own forecasts.
10   We've given that to the Office for Budget Responsibility.
11   They are forecasting growth this year, as are almost every other economic forecaster.
12   That's what the forecasters say.

Here, Clegg first implies that economic forecasts should not be talked about by labelling anyone who would do this 'foolish' (line 2). He not only avoids giving a substantial reply to the journalist's question but also, by implication of suggesting that answering the particular question would be 'foolish', could be seen as ridiculing both the question and the one who asked it. Clegg follows this up with some straightforward positive self-presentation in line 4 ("we're doing the right reforms") that is not supported by any data.

Cameron then indicates that he and Clegg should not be expected to talk about the economic outlook for the UK, because the responsibility to make economic forecasts has been given by the government to a specific agency: the Office for Budget Responsibility (line 10). Both ministers apparently regard talking about economic forecasts as something that may attract blame – especially if their predictions later turn out to be wrong. Therefore they have preemptively established a separate unit that they can conveniently use as a blame 'lightning rod': the ministers can choose not to provide possibly 'inconvenient' information themselves by claiming that officially this is a task for someone else (*topos of law*). Notably, Cameron represents the Office for Budget Responsibility as an 'outgroup' by using third person plural pronoun 'they' ("they are forecasting growth"), thus further distancing himself from the forecast. Moreover, the name of the unit – Office for Budget Responsibility – is salient, because it implies that the unit takes responsibility for the budget, thereby seemingly removing (at least some of) the responsibility for financial outcomes from the rest of the government.

'Lying doggo' (a British informal term for 'being in hiding and keeping quiet') as a blame avoidance strategy basically means opting out of conversation or opting for one-way communication. In this case, officeholders do not regard opponents as serious partners in the discussion and do not defend their standpoints ("No comment"), thus violating the essential pragma-dialectical rules which should grant the parties with conflicting views the freedom to argue and the obligation to give reasons.

Admittedly, silence can be a difficult phenomenon to study and exemplify in linguistic terms as it seems to involve no text or talk. However, the strategic uses of silence in political communication can be sometimes interpreted by analysing metadiscourses about these silences, that is, what others say that they see as being absent from

someone's discourse (Schröter, 2013). Here is an example of such metadiscourse. On 21 June 2012, the BBC News ran a story titled 'Cameron ducks Gary Barlow tax avoidance question'. The article points out that when comedian Jimmy Carr and (Conservative Party supporting) musician Gary Barlow were both accused of using tax avoidance schemes, then the Prime Minister David Cameron publicly criticised Carr but did not say anything about Barlow. Cameron opted out of discussing this topic simply by saying that he was not going to give a "running commentary" on people's tax affairs.

Working behind the scenes is most directly related to linguistic and non-linguistic forms of coercion and bribery and is often aimed at silencing the opponents. It may involve administering systematic personal attacks on potential blame makers (*argumentum ad baculum, argumentum ad hominem*), sometimes threatening them with legal sanctions (*topos of law*) or with humiliation, that is, offending their positive face. This strategy is manipulative as its goal is to induce less powerful groups into tending to accept the arguments of a more powerful organisation.

It is very difficult to obtain concrete textual examples of such covert interactions.[37] However, compelling evidence of behind-the-scenes relationships between government officeholders and the press has emerged, for example, from a 2012 independent inquiry in the UK, commonly known as the *Leveson Report*. The report was commissioned by the UK Government to cover the culture, practices and ethics of the press in its relations with the public, the police, and politicians. In the executive summary of the report, Lord Justice Leveson, who led the inquiry, concludes that over several decades the political parties and the government "have had or developed too close a relationship with the press in a way which has not been in the public interest" and adds that "in part, it has been a matter of going too far in trying to control the supply of news and information to the public in return for the hope of favourable treatment by sections of the press" (The Leveson Inquiry, 2012: 26). Therefore an analyst of discursive strategies of blame avoidance in government should give due consideration to a possibility that some important moves in the blame game at hand may be unobservable and extra-linguistic.

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[37] There are only a few linguistically informed empirical studies that focus on analysing backstage activity in political organisations; for instance, see Wodak (2000, 2011).

4.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I have tried to develop a systematic approach to dissecting and interpreting communicative aspects of blame avoiding behaviour in government in terms of specific discursive strategies. At times, officeholders use intricate and creative ways of shifting blame, backgrounding blameworthy phenomena in their text and talk, or making blame seem less targeted. The proposed framework could help discourse analysts see certain linguistic features in government communication not only as constitutive elements of discursive strategies (ways of arguing, attributing, mitigating, etc.) but possibly also as elements of particular broader socio-political macro-strategies – ways of avoiding blame.

Admittedly, my framework has at least two limitations. First, it is tentative and not necessarily comprehensive. Further empirical studies of text and talk patterns of executive government institutions or particular officeholders who try to avoid accusations of wrongdoing could point to specific discursive choices which may not fit under any of the proposed categories. Also, as my example analyses have proven, in real life situations we should expect to observe simultaneous or mixed use (blending) of several discursive strategies of avoiding blame risk. Furthermore, some of the reactive discursive strategies may be applied only together with non-discursive anticipative practices of blame avoidance (e.g., establishing the Office for Budget Responsibility and then using it as a 'lightning rod' for blame in public text and talk). I will discuss how to interpret some of the combinations of verbal and non-verbal defensive strategies further in Chapters 6 and 7.

The second caveat or challenge is that the heuristic can only be effectively used in conjunction with additional systematic analysis of the components of the blame game wherein the strategies are enacted, such as the subject matter of a blame event or a blame risk, the actors, the magnitude of harm caused or the seriousness of a violation, and so forth. The context of a blame game, as mentioned in the previous chapter, may be operationalised by breaking it down into several layers of analysis (following Wodak, 2011; see Appendix A). The context entails *intertextual and interdiscursive relationships,* for instance, capturing the dynamics of interaction and taking into consideration the many genres in which the described strategies may occur. In future research, it might be possible to reveal any typical sequences of discursive moves by

different participants of the blame game in particular genres of executive governance, like face-to-face interactions, policy documents, official news releases, personal emails, speeches, blog posts, interviews, and so on.[38] The context entails *extra-linguistic institutional and situational variables*, such as the preferred ways of sustaining domination within the blame taking institution, the formality/informality of the situation, and – probably most saliently – whether the text and talk about blame are publicly mediated or remain solely in the backstage. It is also evident that some blame avoidance strategies are more overt and can be more easily detected by analysing micro-processes of discourse while others are more hidden (e.g., behind-the-scenes work). Hence, additional attention should be given to coercion as a central strategic function of exercising administrative power.[39] The context of a blame game also entails its broader *historical and socio-political backdrop,* for instance, the financial crisis and austerity politics in the UK in my study. I introduce more socio-political contextual information in the following chapter, where I take a closer look at how a blame game was played out between the then Leader of the Opposition David Cameron and the then Prime Minister Gordon Brown during the outset of a financial crisis in the UK in 2007 and 2008.

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[38] See, for instance, how Wodak (2006b) analyses sequences of 'strategies of remembering' the war crimes in interviews carried out in Austria.

[39] As I noted in Chapter 1, Chilton (2004, pp. 45-46) describes coercion as a main category of 'strategic function' in political language use along with legitimisation/delegitimisation and representation/misrepresentation.

5. 'A reckless prudence' versus 'global financial turmoil': An analysis of the opposition–government blame game in opinion articles

On 14 September 2007, Northern Rock, one of the UK's largest mortgage lenders, suffered from the biggest run on a British bank in more than a century. Panicking depositors withdraw £1 billion after the BBC revealed that Northern Rock had asked for emergency financial support from the Bank of England. In the UK context, this can be regarded as the 'materialising' of the emerging financial crisis, because up until then the reported subprime mortgage market problems in the United States had not been perceived as a threat to the UK (Koller & Farrelly, 2010).

Two days after the collapse of Northern Rock, David Cameron, the then opposition leader and the head of the Conservative Party, published an article in *Sunday Telegraph*, titled "These are the Fruits of a Reckless 'Prudence'", in which he argued that the Labour government that had been in power for ten consecutive years by that time, should be blamed for the damage caused by the crisis in the UK. From then on, as the financial crisis evolved in the UK, the members of the Conservative opposition systematically talked and wrote about the crisis as the 'Labour's debt crisis' – and this usage persisted after the Conservatives took over the leadership of the UK government following the 2010 elections (Hay, 2011, 2013; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012).

The global turmoil in the financial industry in the late 2000s engendered a multiplicity of competing blame narratives. For example, the British economist Howard Davies identified 38 different strands of explanations regarding potential culprits in the blame game related to the financial crisis. He observed that the imperative of blame avoidance accounted for the proliferation of various accounts.

> It is perhaps not surprising that such a plethora of explanations should have been articulated. We are all influenced by our perceptions, prejudices and interests. Central bankers are not likely to volunteer that weak monetary policy was at the heart of the problem. . . . Politicians are not likely to say that they were guilty of fuelling the fire with ill-considered social interventions. Regulators rarely confess to having been asleep at wheel. Bankers are unlikely to put their hands

up and acknowledge that it was their short-term greed and recklessness which was to blame. (Davies, 2010, p. 5)

It is not surprising that David Cameron chose to use the bank run as an opportunity to place blame for the crisis particularly on the Labour government and not on anyone else. In modern Western democracies, the politicians who are campaigning for power – leaders of opposition parties and members of shadow cabinets – are generally engaged in blaming the incumbent government and its individual officeholders (Weaver, 1986). Opposition's goal is to erode the credibility of those in power by drawing public attention to stories about how rulers' bad deeds and bad character has caused some harm, loss, or failure, or would increase the possibility of such negative occurrences. They are usually 'on attack' as they attempt to change the status quo and gain power. Accordingly, the officeholders who are in power, including prime ministers and members of their cabinets, are predominantly engaged in blame avoidance. Their goal is to maintain a reasonable level of public trust and credibility by justifying and explaining their (in)actions and fending off attributions of bad character. They are often 'on defence' as they attempt to sustain their power and maintain the status quo.

Such opposition–government blame games may revolve around specific instances of personal transgression, such as an executive officeholder's abuse of power, financial or sexual misconduct, or her inappropriate speech act. However, blame games could also be understood as dramaturgical performances, staged for particular audiences, where particular actors – blame makers and blame takers – present and defend their strategic definitions of what constitutes "a good way of governing", "a good policy", "a policy failure", or "a social problem". Government blame games often involve much more than mere personal attacks and defences. They have broader political functions. Stories and arguments about blame can be used to "challenge or protect an existing social order", "legitimise and empower particular actors as 'fixers' of the problem", and "create new political alliances" (Stone, 2012, p. 224).

Governments' motivation for focusing on self-preservation becomes particularly salient during the times of economic recessions because incumbent parties face an increased risk of being punished by disgruntled voters at the next elections (Weaver, 1986). In 2008, the financial crisis in the UK became more and more acute. On 8

October 2008, the Labour government announced a major package to support the banking sector, up to an aggregate total of £500 billion in loans and guarantees. Two days later, the Prime Minister and Labour Party leader Gordon Brown published an opinion piece, titled "We Must Lead the World to Financial Stability", in *The Times,* where he not only justified the bank rescue plan of his government, but also defended it against blame by suggesting that his government has limited capacity to alleviate the financial instability in the long run due to the global nature of the crisis. Brown's defensive stance may have been justified, because the financial crisis started in the United States, the UK was interdependent with the United States in terms of both finance and trade, and the fragility of the UK economy predated the rule of the Labour government (Hay, 2010, 2013; Hay & Wincott, 2012).

As already noted in Chapter 1, opinion pieces in newspaper articles can be used by government officeholders as genres of reactive blame avoidance. Using such a newspaper genre enables them to present and develop their persuasive arguments more substantially and independently from an immanent external interference by political opponents, interviewers, or editors (as would be the case if they were presenting their messages, for instance, during the Question Time in the Parliament, via TV interviews or journalistic articles).[40] However, the genre of an opinion piece also has important limitations: The performers of such written discourses cannot use non-textual rhetorical devices like intonation or body language to elicit particular audience effects (unlike in political genres that use sound and images, such as podcasts or posters). Neither can they receive instant audience feedback and use it for their advantage (this could be the case in live public speaking situations, e.g., an orator can enjoy a long applause). Moreover, the audience of these pieces can take their time to read and re-read the article, and pay more attention to the logical appeal and consistency of the argument. Thus it seems reasonable to focus my analysis on the strategies of argumentation used in such articles.

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[40] In the UK, the weekly session of the Prime Minister's Questions at the House of Commons is a parliamentary institution which has increasingly become a rowdy verbal battle between the Leader of the Opposition and the Prime Minister (Bates, Kerr, Byrne, & Stanley, 2014). Broadcast interviews with politicians often involve aggressive questioning by journalists who seek celebrity status through showing adversarial stance towards powerful officeholders (Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

In the previous chapter, I analysed excerpts from Gordon Brown's article to exemplify the use of excuses and justifications as discursive strategies of blame avoidance. Below, I attempt to reconstruct his defensive argument, published at the peak of the crisis, in more detail, and juxtapose this with an opposing offensive argument presented in an earlier opinion piece by the Leader of the Opposition David Cameron. I seek to identify and interpret the reactive defensive discursive moves used by the Prime Minister in response to blame making of the opposition in the context of escalating economic problems and the falling public support to the government. By doing so, I continue my investigation into reactive blame avoidance in the public (RQ 3) that I launched in the previous chapter, but with greater focus on argument structures and competing accounts of the crisis as a blame event.

5.1 The argument model of the blame game

The basic goal of the government blame game is to persuade an audience (e.g., the readers of a newspaper) that someone in question, such as a government or a concrete officeholder, either should or should not be blamed. Presenting arguments is one of the possible ways of achieving this. Argumentation can be defined as a linguistic/cognitive action pattern of problem-solving that is characterised by a sequence of speech acts (e.g., expressive, declarative, assertive, commissive, interrogative, directive) that are used to convince somebody of the acceptability of a standpoint by challenging or justifying controversial validity claims about truth and normative rightness, that is, questions of knowledge and questions of what should or should not be done (Reisigl, 2014).

From the argumentation analytic perspective, both blame makers and blame takers may use argumentative moves to manipulate the audience's perception of a possibly negative event and the perception of agency for a negative event (i.e., what is true), and convince the audience that a particular agent should or should not be blamed (i.e., what is normatively right to do). For example, a blame maker may claim that a particular event (e.g., a bank run) was negative, and that the incumbent government deserves blame, because it did not take any action despite having both an obligation and capacity to prevent this event. On the other hand, an officeholder who avoids blame may claim that there is actually no reason to blame anyone because little or no

harm has been done, or that the negative event has been caused unintentionally or by someone else, or that the event was unpredictable.

The basic elements of arguments that underlie such claims can be delineated based on Toulmin's (2003) functional model for analysing arguments.[41] Within his model of argument,

- *claim* is contestable statement that has to be justified,
- *data* are facts, evidence, or reasons given to support a particular claim,
- *warrant* connects particular claims and data; it is often based on values that are assumed to be shared with the listener and is not always expressed explicitly; it can be explicated in the form "if x, then y" or "y, because x";
- *backing* is a statement that is used to give additional support to the warrant,
- *qualifier* is a phrase that may be added to the claim to indicate its strength (e.g., 'usually', 'sometimes', 'under these conditions'), and
- *rebuttal* is a counter-argument or exception to the claim.

Each argument must contain at least the first three of these elements, even though sometimes any of these elements may remain unexpressed (Kienpointner, 1996). In arguments over blame, the claims are typically made about the harmfulness (or more broadly – negativity) of an event, the cause(s) of the event, and the (degree of) blameworthiness or otherwise of an actor, such as a government or a concrete officeholder. Data, accordingly, are evidence presented to support such claims. For example, this may include evidence of whether or not a negative event took place, how much harm was caused, whether or not a causal link exists between the negative event and the blame taker, whether or not the blame taker had an intention to cause the negative event, and whether or not the blame taker had the capacity and obligation to avoid the negative event from occurring. I present a simplified functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame in Figure 5.1 below.[42]

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[41] Notably, Toulmin's model has been long adopted in public policy analysis (e.g., Dunn, 1981), but has not been widely applied to government blame games.

[42] The simplified Toulmin model has been advanced as a useful analytic device by Kienpointner (1996), and employed in discourse-historical studies by Forchtner (2013) and Reisigl (2014), among others.

Data

Evidence that supports the claim of someone's blameworthiness or otherwise

E.g., evidence of:
- existence or non-existence of a negative event;
- great or small magnitude of the negative event;
- existence or non-existence of a causal link between the negative event and the blame taker;
- intention of the blame taker to cause the negative event;
- capacity and obligation of the blame taker to avoid the negative event from occurring

Warrant

A conclusion rule that is used to connect data to the claim

E.g., "if a negative event occurred, X caused it, intended to cause it, and had the capacity and obligation to prevent it from occurring, then X should be blamed"

Claim

Statement that someone in question should or should not be blamed

Figure 5.1. The basic functional argument model of attributing and avoiding blame

Even though this layout of an argument seems simple, the actual arguments used in blame games, either in opinion articles or other genres, may be rather complex and thus difficult to unpack. There are at least two reasons for this.

First, the elements in the argument are often *left implicit*, as the arguer expects the audience to 'fill in the gaps' based on an assumed common ground. For example, a blame maker may say that the government should be blamed (claim), because whenever a policy fails, the government deserves blame (warrant). In this case, the blame maker does not provide any data and expects the audience to be able to infer (or perhaps make up) the evidence that would support the claim in this particular case. To bring another hypothetical example, an officeholder may say in response to an accusation that she did not intend to cause any harm (data). In this case, the

officeholder makes neither the warrant nor the claim explicit. She expects the audience to supply both the conclusion rule ("if an actor causes harm unintentionally, then she does not deserve blame") as well as the conclusion ("therefore this officeholder should not be blamed"). Moreover, arguments may involve *allusions*, that is, indirect references to presumably shared experiences and understandings that invite the audience to assign a particular meaning to an actor or an event. Hence, analysts may need a lot of non-linguistic contextual knowledge to grasp what kind of common ground with the audience at hand the arguer presumes, and how this knowledge can be exploited for the purposes of persuasion.

The second complicating factor for analysts of arguments over blame is that the claim that someone deserves or does not deserve blame may be supported by a *chain of arguments*. For example, a blame maker may treat data about the magnitude of a negative act and data about the causal link between the negative event and the government as separate claims that need to be supported first, and construct separate sub-arguments to support each of these (using certain sub-data and sub-warrants). Only after these data have been supported, the blame maker may move on to make the main claim: the government should be blamed for causing the negative event. To put it differently, both blame making and blame avoiding may involve, in the first instance, defending epistemic propositions about what is or is not true, and only thereafter normative propositions about what should or should not be done. When the players in the blame game provide many sub-arguments, the complexity of the argument structure increases accordingly.[43]

Argumentation is always related to a particular topic. Hence, it is necessary for discourse analysts to look beyond general (functional, formal, abstract) aspects of argument and try to discover the topic-related argumentation schemes (Reisigl, 2014). Following the discourse-historical approach to analysing political argumentation (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Reisigl, 2014), I pay particular attention to the use of topic-specific warrants or *topoi* in blame games. Topoi, as explained earlier, can be seen as

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[43] Moreover, especially during prolonged arguments that unfold between adversarial parties over longer periods of time, the arguers may repeatedly alter any of the elements in their argument so that these would have a better 'fit' with other elements. For example, a blame maker may propose that the government deserves blame, but during the course of the debate realise that the data she can provide allows her to blame only a particular officeholder. So she may choose to revise her claim accordingly, that is, substitute the initial blame taker with a more 'suitable' one.

quasi-argumentative shortcuts, content-related conclusion rules that connect argument(s) with the claim, but whose plausibility can be relatively easily questioned (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, pp. 74-80; Reisigl, 2014, pp. 77-79). To unpack such condensed arguments, one has to specifically look for the use of (presumably) collectively shared context-specific symbols – something that is already accepted by the target audience. For instance, if a person defending a claim presents a lot of statistical figures (disregarding their actual truth validity) then the warrant may be interpreted as the *topos of numbers*: sufficient numerical evidence is taken by the particular audience to mean that the claim has been 'demonstrated' to be true.

From a normative point of view, certain uses of such conclusion rules may be considered to be fallacious when these do not meet the pragma-dialectical criteria for rational dispute (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992; Reisigl, 2014). However, it may be very difficult to distinguish between sound and fallacious arguments, because doing so requires considerable topic- and field-related knowledge, for instance, about the intentions, capacities, and obligations of a particular blame taker in particular socio-historical and institutional settings. Moreover, evaluation based on pragma-dialectical rules may seem inadequate if players in the blame game regard their interaction primarily as an *eristic dialogue*, that is, "a combative kind of verbal exchange in which two parties are allowed to bring out their strongest arguments to attack the opponent by any means, and have a kind of protracted verbal battle to see which side can triumph and defeat or even humiliate the other side" (Walton, 1998, p. 181). Arguing for the sake of conflict, instead of resolving a conflict and reaching a consensus with the incumbent, may seem like an essential modus operandi for the opposition. Members of the opposition may regard defeating or humiliating the incumbent in a blame game as a necessary strategic step towards the resignation of an officeholder or the whole government (perhaps via a motion of no confidence following a scandal), or the defeat of the ruling parties at the next elections. In a similar vein, members of the government may not be interested in having a rational debate with the opposition, but rather choose to systematically ignore or cast doubt on opposition's standpoints, perhaps by claiming that these merely express the incompetence and bad intentions of the members of the opposition.

In the next sections, I will present the diagrams of the arguments put forward by David Cameron and Gordon Brown in their newspaper articles, and explain what kind

of warrants (or *topoi*) the former uses to attach, and the latter to deflect blame for the financial crisis in the UK. The full texts of these articles are provided in Appendix D.[44]

5.2 The opposition leader's argument: The government deserves blame

The opposition leader David Cameron uses a chain of arguments that support the claim that the UK government should be blamed for the ongoing crisis. I will first lay out his central epistemic sub-argument: that the UK economy has become vulnerable to the crisis because of "a huge expansion of public and private debt" over the past decade (Figure 5.2).

Cameron writes:

56   This Government has presided over a huge expansion of public and private debt

57   without showing awareness of the risks involved.

58   Though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US, over the past decade

59   the gun has been loaded at home. Under Labour our economic growth has been

60   built on a mountain of debt. And as any family with debts knows,

61   higher debt makes us more vulnerable to the unexpected. In short,

62   the increases in debt in the UK have added a new risk to economic stability.

Here, the relationship between claim and data is causal: a particular negative situation that is argued to exist (a country's vulnerability to the crisis) is the result of a particular factor (expansion of public and private debt in the country). The warrant is based on *analogy*, as it is backed up by an assumption that if debt makes a family vulnerable, it also makes a country vulnerable. Cameron suggests that every person who has (had) debt in their family should also understand the risks related to debt on the state level. Debt on a micro-economic (family) level and debt on macro-economic (state) level are presented as essentially similar and easily comparable.

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[44] Even though the general comparison of the articles by Brown and Cameron is not really at issue in my analysis, it is worth pointing out some similarities in terms of their field of action, genre, and medium. Both articles serve the function of formation of public attitudes, opinion, and will (for this distinction, see Reisigl & Wodak, 2009, p. 91). Both articles are relatively lengthy opinion pieces: The length of Cameron's article is 1,062 words, and Brown's 945 words. And both articles were published in generalist, national, non-tabloid newspapers with similarly large readerships: the circulation figures were 644,828 for *Sunday Telegraph* (in September 2007) and 629,561 for *The Times* (in October 2008).

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                       │
│  Data                            ──────────┐──────────►  Sub-Claim    │
│                                            │                          │
│  UK has seen "a huge                       │            Over the past decade, │
│  expansion of public and                   │            the UK has become     │
│  private debt" during the                  │            vulnerable to the     │
│  past decade:                              │            financial crisis      │
│                                            │                          │
│                                   Warrant                             │
│  1) The level of personal                                             │
│  debt has trebled to £1.3         Large public and private            │
│  trillion                         debt makes a country                │
│  2) People in the UK owe          vulnerable to financial             │
│  more than the entire             crises                              │
│  national income                                                      │
│  3) Mortgage payments are                  │                          │
│  at their highest for 15 years             │                          │
│  4) Insolvencies have                      │                          │
│  quadrupled and are at            Backing                             │
│  record levels                                                        │
│  5) Someone goes bust in          "As any family with debts           │
│  the UK every seven minutes       knows, higher debt                  │
│  6) The government is             makes us more                       │
│  borrowing £35 billion a year     vulnerable to the                   │
│  7) The UK government is          unexpected"                         │
│  borrowing more than any                                              │
│  other in Europe                                                      │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Figure 5.2. Cameron's sub-argument that the UK economy has become vulnerable

No actual evidence is provided to support the proposition that debt always has the same consequences, either for a family or a country's economy. The backing – "as any family with debts knows" – relies on *argumentum ad populum*: It is presumed to be true because many people believe so.

The data that Cameron presents in lines 63–68 are mostly based on selected statistical evidence. The bulk of this evidence pertains to the increase in private debt (points 1–5 listed under Data in Figure 5.2); public debt receives somewhat less attention (points 6–7 listed under Data in Figure 5.2). All of these points are stated as unmodalised, categorical truths. The evidence is selected and presented in such a way that is most likely to evoke a sense of danger. The implicit conclusion rule could be reconstructed as an emotional appeal to threat: for example, "if we owe more than we earn then it

makes us vulnerable and this should be stopped". The comparison of selected statistical indicators in the UK to those of other countries serves the same purpose. The conclusion rule can be restated in the following way: "If a government is borrowing more than other European governments then it is dangerous and should be stopped." In other words, his data have been strategically selected to modulate the audience's perception of the magnitude of a negative event and advance from a claim of debt-induced vulnerability to an (implied) call to blame and oust the government.

Cameron's overall argument that blame for the crisis in the UK should be placed on the Labour government is sketched out in Figure 5.3 below. Cameron implies that the Labour government deserves blame on the grounds that the L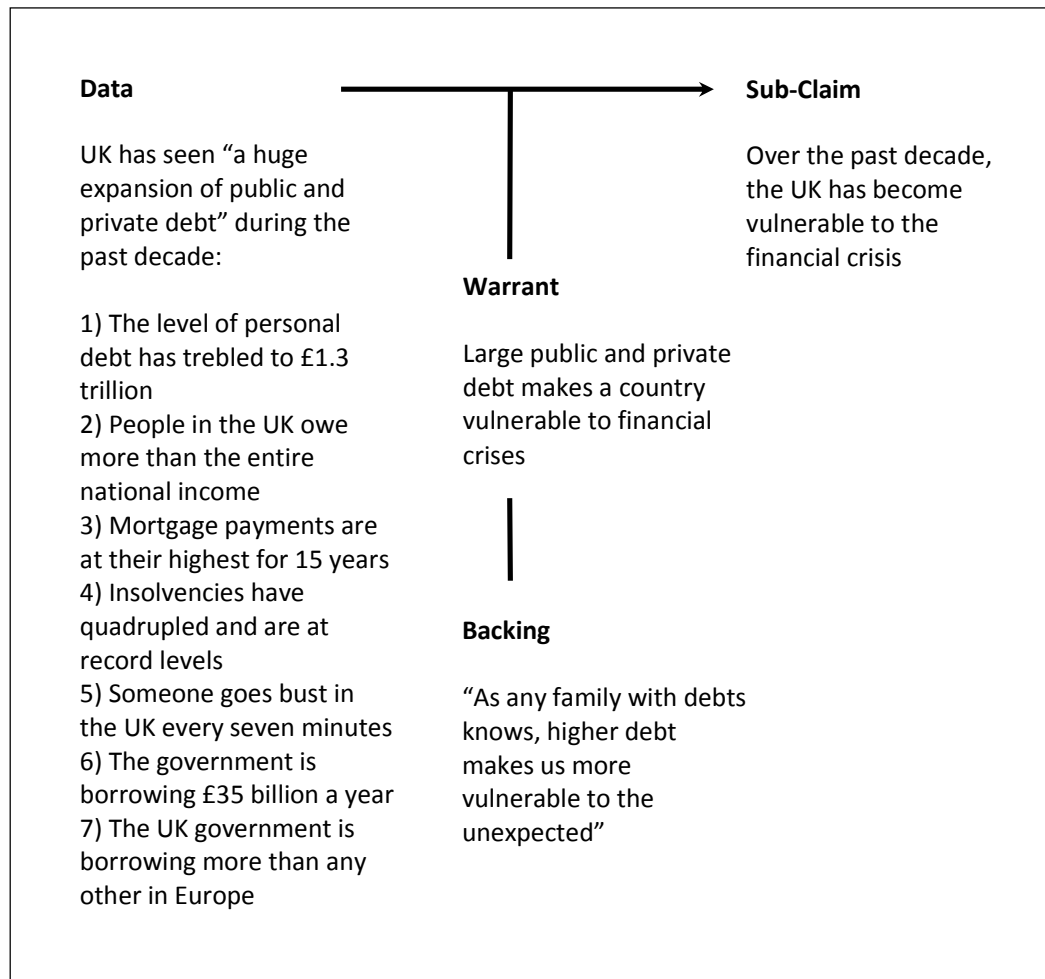abour government "has presided over a huge expansion of public and private debt without showing awareness of the risks involved" (lines 56–57). The conclusion rule that leads to the attribution of blame to the government could be called *the topos of government as a protector* and explicated as follows: "A government in office *can* and *should* limit a country's vulnerability to financial crises". The use of this conclusion rule stands on the assumption that the audience shares the view that (a) governments have a particular capacity: they *can* limit public and private debt if they wish to do so, and (b) governments have a particular obligation: they *should* always limit (excessive) public and private debt. In other words, Cameron suggests that the government should be regarded as having full control over risk factors related to financial crises and could therefore be legitimately blamed for failing to take steps to anticipate and avoid crises. A comparison with other governments serves as a backing for his warrant. Importantly, by doing so, Cameron narrows down the scope of the argument: he suggests that the financial turmoil should be understood as the 'Labour's debt crisis' (see Hay, 2013) rather than a broader systemic problem that affects many countries. Moreover, it may be interpreted as an attempt to imply that the introduction of Conservative policies, such as sustained reductions in public spending and cuts in welfare state benefits, is the only possible solution to the crisis in the UK.

Cameron briefly mentions a possible counter-argument or a reservation to his standpoint that the Labour government should be held accountable for the financial crisis in the UK. He writes, "Though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US" and then quickly dismisses this point by stating that "over the past decade the gun has been loaded at home." It seems that he does so mainly to represent the crisis

Data		Claim
1) Over the past decade, the UK has become vulnerable to the financial crisis	**Warrant**	The Labour government has failed to fulfil its obligation and should be blamed for making the UK vulnerable to the financial crisis
2) The Labour government has been in office for the past decade	A government in office *can* and *should* limit a country's vulnerability to financial crises	
		Rebuttal
	Backing	"Though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US…"
	"Our Government is borrowing more than any other in Europe"	

Figure 5.3. Cameron's argument that the Labour government deserves blame

metaphorically as a gunshot: 'loading of a gun' presumes intentional human action, and 'at home' stands for the UK, hence the use of this metaphor supports his overall claim of Labour government's control and intentionality in relation to the crisis. This rebuttal here should be seen as a demonstration of irrelevance rather than an acknowledgement of some of the merits of a different view. Note the modality of this claim: 'may' functions as a qualifier that limits its strength, thus actually making the alternative claim – that the Labour government should be blamed for the crisis – seem more plausible.

5.3 The Prime Minister's argument: The government does not deserve blame

Now, I will return to an analysis of Gordon Brown's article and show how he tries to avoid blame by arguing that his government deserves praise, but its capacity to solve the crisis in the UK is limited. As suggested in the previous chapter, this involves providing both justifications and excuses. Brown presents the crisis mainly in relation to a global 'turmoil' within the banking sector (unlike Cameron who emphasises the increasing public and private debt in the UK). Brown writes:

4   The banking system is fundamental to everything we do.

5   Every family and every business in Britain depends upon it.

6   That is why, when threatened by the global financial turmoil

7   that started in America and has now spread across the world,

8   we in Britain took action to secure our banks and financial system.

The first two sentences of the article (lines 4 and 5) are presented as unmitigated facts, as common knowledge. Brown describes banks as essentially beneficial for the society as a whole: The first person plural pronoun 'we' seems to include "every family and every business" in the country. However, this 'we' simultaneously denotes the political leadership of the country: his fellow members of the Labour government who 'took action' by deciding to support the banks. To justify his government's decision, Brown presents it as unquestionably necessary, using warrants that I have called *the topos of threat to the banks* ("if banks have problems then it poses a threat to everybody and one should do something to secure the banks"), and *the topos of government as a protector* ("if threats to people emerge then the government should do something to protect the people against them"). These implicit warrants seem to lead to the conclusion that the UK government has fulfilled its obligation to protect people, and deserves praise for helping the banks (which is represented as equivalent to protecting people). A possible way of laying out this justificatory argument as a diagram is provided in Figure 5.4.

Data

1) Banks in the UK
are in trouble

2) The government
has taken steps to
help the banks

Warrants

If banks have problems, this
poses a threat to everybody
and one should do something
to secure the banks

If threats to everybody emerge,
the government should do
something to protect the
people against them

Backing

"The banking system is
fundamental to everything we
do"

Claim

The UK
government has
fulfilled its
obligation and
deserves praise for
helping the banks

Figure 5.4. Brown's argument that his government deserves praise

However, the bulk of Brown's article contains arguments that imply that the UK
government's capacity to bring about a recovery from the crisis should not be
overestimated (Figure 5.5). In other words, he argues that he and his government
cannot take full responsibility for solving the crisis in the UK – and thus should not be
blamed if the 'turmoil' continues and has further negative consequences for the people.
By doing so, he constructs an understanding of the ongoing financial crisis that is at
loggerheads with Cameron's claims, and opens up the possibilities for explaining the
crisis in other terms than 'Labour's debt'.

Brown uses the words "global", "globe" and "international" repeatedly throughout his
article to sustain the definition of the crisis as universal, complex, and not specific to
the UK, thus suggesting that the UK government's control over crisis management is
necessarily limited (e.g., "But because this is a global problem, it requires a global
solution. Indeed this now moves to a global stage…").

Data

1) The current financial crisis is a global problem and can only be dealt with at the international level
- International meetings are held to discuss how to deal with the crisis
- The UK government calls other governments to adopt certain policies to alleviate the crisis

2) It was impossible for anyone to foresee the financial crisis as well as the kinds of policies governments have been forced to adopt to contain the crisis

Warrants

1) If global threats emerge then no single government has the full capacity to alleviate these

2) If a threat is unforeseeable then the threat cannot be easily prevented or contained

Sub-Claim

The UK government does not have the full capacity for solving the crisis in the UK

Figure 5.5. Brown's sub-argument that his government lacks full capacity to solve the crisis

The final paragraph of Brown's article is remarkable for its massive stacking of words and phrases that universalise the crisis, foreground it as 'global', and drive home the idea that the UK government can neither be blamed for causing the crisis nor expected to alleviate the crisis without fully orchestrated actions of innumerable external agents:

72   We must now act for the long term with co-ordinated national actions.

73   The resolve and purposefulness of governments and people across the world is being

74   put to the test. But across the old frontiers we must now redouble our efforts

75   internationally. For it is only through the boldest of co-ordinated actions across

76   the globe that we will adequately support families and businesses in this global age.

Brown's references to international meetings and his call to other governments to "lead the world to financial stability" similarly support the standpoint that overcoming the crisis should not be seen as a matter that is entirely internal to the UK. The conclusion rules in work here could be perhaps called the *topoi of the limited capacity of the government*, which could be restated as "if global threats emerge then no single

government has the full capacity to alleviate these" and "if a government does not have the full capacity to solve a crisis, then it does not deserve blame".

What Brown presents here could be categorised as a 'complexity story' (Stone, 1989). In such a story,

> images of complex cause are in some sense analogous to accidental or natural cause. They postulate a kind of innocence, in that no identifiable actor can exert control over the whole system or web of interactions. Without overarching control, there can be no purpose and no responsibility. (Stone, 1989, p. 289)

Another argumentative move of deflecting blame constitutes an excuse: Brown suggests that it was impossible for anyone to foresee the crisis and the particular actions the government had to take. For instance, he writes:

24   When I became Prime Minister I did not expect to make the decision, along with

25   Alistair Darling, for the Government to offer to take stakes in our high street banks,

26   just as nobody could have anticipated the action taken in America.

The shortcut to concluding that the UK government should not be blamed is a kind of *topos of ignorance* ("If a threat is unforeseeable, then those who failed to foresee it and take precautions should not be blamed"). In this case, ignorance is used as a valuable asset that helps the potential blame taker to deny liability (McGoey, 2012).

To sum up, in Brown's article the causes and solutions of the crisis are externalised: The crisis came from 'America' and the government lacks the capacity to deal with it on its own – the crisis can only be tackled by 'co-ordinated actions across the globe' (Figure 5.6).

5.4 Analysing debates over blame: Argument models and beyond

Looking at the simplified argument diagrams sketched out above, it becomes clear that Cameron and Brown tell their audiences two different stories about the financial crisis. Importantly, the stories involve different understandings of the capacities and actions of the British government.

```
┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                                       │
│   Data                              ──────────────►    Claim          │
│                                             │                         │
│   1) The financial turmoil                  │          The UK         │
│   started in America                        │          government does│
│                                             │          not deserve    │
│                                    Warrants            blame for the   │
│   2) The UK government                                crisis          │
│   does not have the full            1) If a government has            │
│   capacity for solving the          not caused a crisis, it           │
│   crisis in the UK                  does not deserve                  │
│                                     blame                             │
│                                                                       │
│                                     2) If a government                │
│                                     does not have the full            │
│                                     capacity for solving a            │
│                                     crisis, it does not               │
│                                     deserve blame                     │
│                                                                       │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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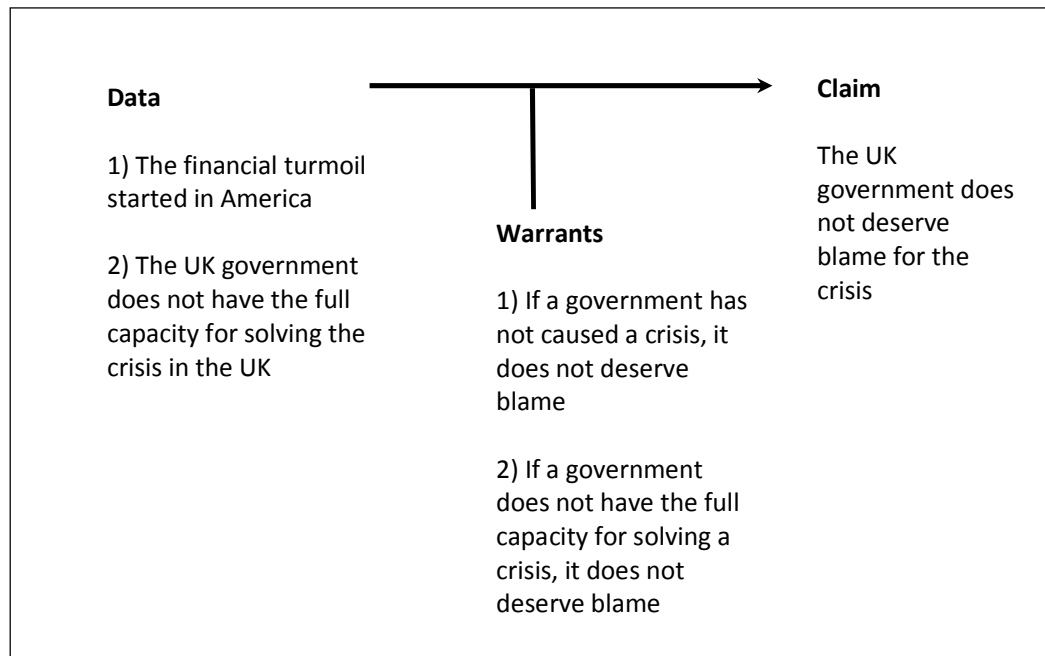
Figure 5.6. Brown's argument that his government does not deserve blame for the crisis

Cameron *internalises* the causes of and solutions to the crisis. He dismisses the point about the foreign origins of the problem ("though the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US…") and presents mainly statistical data about the UK to support the claim that the country has become vulnerable to the financial crisis due to excessive debt. By presuming that every government can and should limit a country's vulnerability to financial crises by reducing debt during their term, he leads the reader towards the conclusion that the Labour government has failed to fulfil its obligation to protect the people – and hence deserves blame.

Brown, on the other hand, *externalises* the causes of and solutions to the crisis. He emphasises the proposition that the origins of the crisis are external ("the global financial turmoil that started in America and has now spread across the world") and presents data about the government's actions to contain the external threat. Thereby he supports the implicit conclusion that the UK government has fulfilled its obligation to protect the interests of the country – and hence deserves praise. However, Brown also presents data to modify the expectations of the readers regarding the capacity of the UK government to foresee and solve the crisis. He represents the crisis as a global problem that was impossible for anyone to foresee, and that can only be dealt with at the international level, involving numerous actors. Brown expects the readers to

conclude that if his government has not caused the crisis, and if it does not have the full capacity to solve a crisis, it does not deserve blame.

My analysis shows how certain argumentative devices can be used both to generate blame and to deflect blame.

- Even though both politicians deal with complex economic and political issues in their texts, their *explicit appeals to presumed common ground are very simple* – or even simplistic and hyperbolic – and thus possibly misleading: "As any family with debts knows, higher debt makes us more vulnerable to the unexpected" (Cameron) and "The banking system is fundamental to everything we do" (Brown).
- Both Cameron and Brown use *appeals to threat*. Cameron presents evidence of certain threats that are internal to the UK so he could place blame on the government for causing these, while Brown talks of the external threats, so he could claim credit for fighting against these.
- Both Cameron and Brown present arguments that rely on the conclusion rule that I have called the *topos of government as a protector*: a supposedly commonsensical understanding that the government has the duty to protect people against (financial) crises. Cameron uses this content-specific warrant to conclude that the government has failed to fulfil its obligation, while Brown uses it to claim that his government is doing a good job.

Cameron generates blame in a relatively straightforward way: he describes a certain harm (UK's increased vulnerability to financial crisis) and attributes the causal agency for bringing about this harm to a concrete Villain – the Labour government. Brown's defensive argumentation is somewhat more complex as it involves manoeuvring between forthright positive self-presentation (the government doing good work by protecting the banks and the people) and somewhat self-deprecating foregrounding of various limitations to his knowledge, capacity, and obligation (the harm was unpredictable, his government alone is not able to bring the crisis to an end, the obligation for alleviating the problem is diffused globally).

Presuming that opinion pieces on serious policy issues in non-tabloid newspapers are fundamentally argumentative, I began writing this analysis with an intention to focus on the uses of particular patterns of argument and topic-specific warrants (*topoi*) for

the purposes of placing or deflecting blame. However, as I proceeded with my work, I soon realised that by zooming in on the articles' *logos* – their logical appeal – I was liable to miss some crucial aspects of their *pathos* – their emotional appeal – that may rise, for example, from the strategic uses of metaphors, frames, and cohesive devices.

In Cameron's article, for instance, the overall sense that the government deserves blame for the crisis arises partially from the metaphorical linking of the crisis with a premeditated gunshot ("over the past decade the gun has been loaded at home") and the idiomatic use of the word "fruit". The headline of Cameron's article, "These are the Fruits of a Reckless 'Prudence'", is presented in a form of an ambiguous causal claim; there are significant omissions: X has been caused by Y's reckless 'prudence'. The use of 'fruits' may allude to the idiomatic phrase "fruits of one's labour", which means the results of one's work, and thus frame the crisis as a direct result of intentional human action rather than a natural or accidental occurrence. "Reckless prudence" is an oxymoron, juxtaposition of words that seemingly contradict each other, evoking the sense of a problem or a conflict. The use of quotation marks indicates irony, thus foregrounding the idea that there is *lack* of prudence – a character trait which in the text of the article is attributed to the government. Hence, the readers are expected to fill in the gaps: they are to conclude that the crisis has been caused by the recklessness of the Labour government.

In Brown's article, the overall sense that the crisis and its causes and solutions are external is elicited not only by his argumentation but also by his peculiar overlexicalisation: the notably repetitive use of words like "global", "across the globe", "across the world", "international", "cross-border".[46] In addition, by focusing solely on the logical appeal of his text, one may overlook Brown's construction of dramatic frames (Us vs Them; Villain—Victim—Hero; discussed in Chapter 4) that position his government on the side of the British public, suggest that his government is a Hero ("when threatened…we in Britain took action to secure our banks"), and hence may reduce the readers' motivation to place blame on his government.

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[46] Notably, references to globalisation were relatively frequent in the rhetoric of the Labour Party even before the onset of the financial crisis. Based on her analysis of a 278,586-word corpus of various text collected from the Labour Party from 1994 to 2007, L'Hôte (2014) concludes that "while globalisation is framed as an agent of progress in discourse, its negative aspects are given significant representation in new Labour discourse", and that these negative aspects "are used as a rhetorical threat in order to legitimate the party's policy choices, domestically as well as internationally" (p. 208).

It is also notable how both politicians make normative statements that attribute obligation to certain actors, thereby possibly affecting the readers' perception of whether the agency for dealing with the crisis is internal or external. Cameron makes such statements specifically about the Labour government, for example, "the Government should move quickly to answer the short term questions" (line 18). Brown, however, targets similar command-like statements externally at various institutions outside of the UK, for instance, "every bank in every country must meet capital requirements that ensure confidence" (line 34) and "the Financial Stability Forum and a reformed International Monetary Fund should play their part not just in crisis resolution but also in crisis prevention" (lines 63–65). Besides providing support to an idea that the locus of blame is either internal or external, the use of normative statements or imperatives could be seen as an indicator of the relatively greater power of the producer of the utterance. Such confrontational displays of power could perform several functions in government blame games. The members of the opposition may choose to do this to add authority to their blame attacks and present themselves as worthy rivals to the incumbents. The officeholders under attack may produce a lot of normative statements and commands based on the calculation that those who give orders to others are generally not perceived by the observers as blame takers.

5.5 Concluding remarks

I hope to have demonstrated that reconstructing the competing argumentation schemes can be a helpful step in interpreting public debates over complex issues of blame, such as opposition–government blame games in opinion articles about the causes of and solutions to certain social or economic problems. Doing so helps to explicate and compare the conflicting claims of blame makers and blame takers, as well as the data that they present to support the claims, and the topic-specific conclusion rules (topoi) that they hope would lead the audience to accept a particular conclusion. However, the analysts should also look beyond basic argumentation strategies and seek to understand, first of all, the broader context and specific political interests framing the debate, and second, how blame is attached or deflected using other kinds of persuasive devices, such as metaphors, lexical cohesion, and ways of framing and positioning, that underlie particular attacks, justifications, or excuses.

6. Anticipative discursive blame avoidance: An analysis of government communication guidelines

In the two preceding chapters, I tried to operationalise certain discursive strategies of blame avoidance that could be seen as mainly reactive: I looked at how officeholders responded to public blame in the frontstage of government communication (RQ 3). In this chapter, I will shift my attention to identifying and interpreting anticipative discursive blame avoidance, that is, defensive strategies used by government communicators before actually receiving blame for a transgression (RQ 4). Anticipative blame avoidance differs from its reactive counterpart in two important respects: Anticipative blame avoidance remains largely in the backstage of government (i.e., the defensive moves are not played out in the public), and no easily observable sequences of blaming and defending take place between blame makers and blame takers. Hence, to spot anticipative blame avoidance in the first place, one should seek out extra-linguistic contextual information (via fieldwork, and by consulting institutional documents and political science literature) about *potential* blame threats or blame risks that government communicators might face in particular situations, and about more or less conventional ways of acting that could supposedly minimise these risks.

One very common anticipative strategy of avoiding blame in public administration is the adoption of written professional codes and operational guidelines. Such documents are used to automate work procedures, thus curbing the personal discretion of each officeholder and diffusing individual responsibility for causing possible mistakes (Hood, 2011). In some countries such as the UK and Sweden, governments have devised more or less formal sets of rules that regulate the day-to-day work of professional government communicators – officeholders who are tasked with communicating with the public on behalf of the government and/or advising political heads of government departments on communication issues (Canel & Sanders, 2013). The tasks of government communicators typically include producing and publicising text, talk, and images about policies, public services, and institutional arrangement of the government, and giving advice and orders to people, for instance, on how to submit annual tax returns. However, government communicators may also be tempted to monitor and control the flows of public information, sometimes restricting access to

some knowledge, or misrepresenting the situation, for example, by lying, verbal evasion, or the use of euphemisms. Even though government communication guidelines are likely to have a noticeable effect on the overall transparency, accountability and inclusivity of government, there has been no detailed analysis, to my knowledge, of how blame risks are discursively constructed and mitigated in such normative texts.

In this chapter, I take a step towards filling that gap in knowledge. I focus on textual examples from the communication propriety guidelines published by the UK Cabinet Office in 2014, and discuss how such documents (a) reflect officeholders' concern about particular historically rooted blame risks, and (b) are constructed in such ways that would supposedly make it easier for government communicators to ward off future blame firestorms. Superficially, communication guidelines may seem like essentially benign instruments that could improve interactions between the government and the public by setting standards for information exchange. In this chapter, however, I wish to provide support to the view that communication policy documents may also be interpreted as complex devices of anticipative blame avoidance and positive self-presentation, employed by government communicators to construct and protect their professional identities.

A useful heuristic point of departure for discursive analysis of anticipative blame avoidance in government is the sociological concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1991). This theoretical construct has been effectively used for describing and explaining role-specific (discursive) practices adopted by professionals, including bureaucrats and politicians (see, e.g., Wodak & Vetter, 1999; Wodak, 2011). Habitus encapsulates the idea that much of day-to-day professional behaviour is conventionalised, internalised, and often subconscious, comprising learned habits, sets of skills, stylistic choices, preferences, and perceptions into which professionals are socialised in organisations. Habitus is characterised by an arbitrary sense of limits to one's behaviour: People tend to enforce self-censorship to meet others' implied expectations in particular social settings or 'force fields'. *Fields*, in Bourdieu's terms, are sets of relations that are characterised by various *capitals*, for instance, power or advantages deriving from acquaintances and networks (social capital), from knowledge and skills, including mastery of language (cultural capital), or from material goods (economic capital). From this perspective, discursive blame avoidance in government may be conceived

of as officeholders using their cultural capital to defend their social and economic capital.

Officeholders incorporate defensive strategies habitually into everyday behaviour in certain socio-political, historical, and organisational contexts. While most government communication professionals may not have attended any training courses that include 'blame avoidance' (or anything similar) in their description, all of them get socialised into the unofficial 'rules of the blame game' in government. They become members of a *community of practice* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002): a group of people who operate in a shared domain of interest, who are committed to joint activities, who learn from each other about the ways of addressing recurring problems in their field, and who continuously construct and experience a shared (professional) identity. They acquire practical expertise in avoiding blame by imitating the successful defensive strategies of the other members of their professional group. They develop 'common sense' understandings of what constitutes a blame risk and how blame should be dealt with: what should or should not be said or done.

To understand the habitual or conventionalised ways of avoiding potential blame in government communication, I need to study the sets of relations that constitute that field, and map out the main field-specific blame risks. Why do government communicators in the UK frequently become targets of blame attacks from various critics like journalists, politicians, and scholars?

6.1 Government communicators as blame takers: Historical and institutional contexts

Blame is often triggered or aggravated by various and, at times, conflicting expectations – held by both government outsiders and insiders – related to the professional role of a government communicator. The role of government communicators has two sides. On the one hand, they are government employees, and in the case of the UK, members of the Civil Service with a tradition spanning over 150 years. On the other hand, they are public relations practitioners (even though they usually do not use this label) and the roots of their occupation are in the corporate propaganda profession that emerged more than a hundred years ago in the United States. Therefore, the origins of the blame risks that the British government

communicators face can be traced by exploring the (controversial) histories of, and the inherent tensions within these two fields of social action – civil service and public relations – that intertwine in their profession and inform their occupational habitus. I will address these in turn.

Civil service and blame

The modern civil service has its origins in the mid-19[th] century bureaucratisation of the British government. Due to the growing number and complexity of tasks it had to fulfil, the government was recommended to recruit employees to a unified Civil Service rather than separate departments, to establish a hierarchical division of labour to increase efficiency of its work, and to select and promote its employees based on merit rather than through political or aristocratic patronage (Lowe, 2011). Today, these principles are regarded as traditional pillars of British public administration. The vast majority of communicators employed by the UK government inhabit various hierarchical positions within the Civil Service. They are increasingly subjected to professional evaluation and training as preconditions for advancing to higher positions in the hierarchy. And, as is the case with all civil servants in the UK, their work is bound by the imperative of political neutrality: they are expected to "carry out their duties for the assistance of the Administration as is duly constituted for the time being, whatever its political complexion" (Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, p. 4). This means, among other things, that when governments change, permanent government communicators usually remain in office and have to 'accommodate' new ministers, new policy preferences, and the shifting demands of the temporary political leadership.

The complex power dynamics between civil servants, their 'political masters', and the public have received a lot of critical academic attention. The German sociologist Max Weber (1905/1958) famously warned that bureaucracy is characterised by the mechanistic and impersonal application of rational rules that would lead to a dehumanised society resembling an 'iron cage'. According to Weber, one of the main traits of bureaucratic organisations was the normative separation of administration and politics. However, the boundaries between bureaucrats (as expert administrators) and politicians (as strategists and policy makers) have become increasingly blurred, and bureaucrats have taken on more strategic policy making powers (see, e.g., Weiss &

Wodak, 2000; Wodak, 2011). Bureaucrats with technical expertise – technocrats – may use their increased power to exclude the majority of the population from democratic discussion over societal values (Habermas, 1968).

The American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1940) observed that bureaucrats focus on rigid ritualistic rule-following (which indicates timidity and conservatism), meanwhile often losing sight of the actual goals of the government. He claimed that bureaucrats develop informal ingroup ties and are likely "to defend their entrenched interests rather than to assist their clientele and elected higher officials" (Merton 1940, p. 564). A somewhat similar view is reflected in the work of the American Public Choice theorist William Niskanen (1994) who maintained that bureaucrats are selfish and primarily seek to increase the power of their offices. Bureaucrats are, according to Niskanen, unable to define or serve the public interest; they only try to protect their jobs and pay by pleasing those individuals ('sponsors') who have a right to promote or fire them.

From the blame avoidance perspective, being part of the Civil Service means that government communicators are vulnerable to such traditional streams of criticism directed at bureaucracy and bureaucrats. Western societies seem to be characterised by a culturally shared negative attitude towards government officeholders who are perceived as concerned primarily with 'self-preservation' and 'image-building', and much less with having honest conversations with people and solving citizens' substantial problems. This attitude arises, at least partially, from the increased public awareness about the officeholders' use of devious public relations management techniques.

Public relations management and blame

Organisational public relations management as a profession historically emerged in the United States at the beginning of the 20[th] century (Cutlip, 1994). The first public relations professionals facilitated the positive media coverage of big corporations and helped them to increase their sales using various propaganda techniques. The use of these techniques expanded and became a part of central government's functions during the First World War, when political leaders in several countries, including the UK, established official propaganda agencies to support their war efforts. The British government's uses of propaganda and the rising importance of government publicity

activities during and between the world wars have been thoroughly studied (Balfour, 1979; Grant, 1994; Messinger, 1992; Ogilvy-Webb, 1965; Sanders & Taylor, 1982; Seymour-Ure, 2003).

During the second half of the 20[th] century, in parallel with the overall rise of 'promotional culture' and political marketing, public relations in Britain developed into a pervasive service industry (L'Etang, 2004; Moloney, 2000, 2006). The use of image repair techniques to protect the reputation of political leaders and bureaucratic institutions became to be seen as a constitutive element of responding to political scandals and crises (see, e.g., Boin, 't Hart, Stern, & Sundelius, 2005; Boin, McConnell, & 't Hart, 2008). By the 1980s, the British government was described as being obsessed with 'media management', orchestrating its publicity efforts, and 'selling its policies like corn flakes' (Franklin, 1994).

Since the 1990s, British political journalism has been characterised by 'demonology of spin' (McNair, 2004). Many commentators have eagerly pointed out specific communicative tactics that officeholders have used to promote themselves and bypass criticism (e.g., Jones, 1995; Gaber, 2000; Quinn, 2012), and 'spin' has often been used as an overarching term referring to any sort of communication activities by a government (Andrews, 2006). Critics have also pointed out that the use of promotional language makes dialogue difficult (Fairclough, 2000), and the prevailing approaches to political marketing management do not fit with democratic theories (Henneberg, Scammell, & O'Shaughnessy, 2009).

Caught between politicians and the public

Officeholders differ in terms of what kind of resources and options they have for dealing with various streams of blame, depending on what kind of position they occupy in the hierarchical power structure of the Civil Service. Hood (2011, pp. 24–43) suggests that within public administration, three 'worlds' of players in government blame games can be delineated:

1. '*top banana world*': leadership, people with celebrity status and often under media attention, who possess abundant resources for handling blame;
2. '*front-line world*': service delivery professionals, street-level bureaucrats, who are usually not in media limelight, but interact directly with people as their customers;

3. *middle managers, regulators, advisers, intermediaries*: a large number of civil servants who are usually less visible to the public.

Communication professionals employed by the British government mostly fall under the latter two categories. A considerable share of them are advisers and intermediaries who usually remain out of the public eye: they write official press releases; post anonymous updates to institutional websites and social networks; monitor the results of public opinion surveys and the content of news and social media; plan, procure, and evaluate marketing and advertising campaigns; organise events (e.g., press briefings); and provide communication advice and services (e.g., speech writing) to top officeholders. Each one of these tasks involves different risks of failure and thus of receiving blame. However, because these professionals stay in the backstage of government, they are likely to receive blame from their internal supervisors (e.g., ministers, permanent secretaries, directors) or colleagues rather than directly from government outsiders like journalists and opposition politicians. Thus they may have a strong incentive to perform in such ways which reduce their (potential) blameworthiness in the eyes of their bosses and other members of their professional ingroup.[47]

Spokespersons of the central government departments could be seen as belonging to the 'front-line world' since they interact daily with journalists as 'customers' and provide them with content for news stories. Spokespersons may not be as much in the media limelight as the 'top bananas' like the ministers and other heads of major executive agencies, but they certainly receive more close and constant personal attention from the press than most other front-line civil servants like tax collectors or planning inspectors. Spokespersons may be cross-examined or heckled by reporters at press briefings and some of them may become infamous among journalists for their attempts to hide, obfuscate, or misrepresent possibly embarrassing information about government. To be able to do their job, they have to develop special skills in defusing direct blame attacks targeted at themselves, their ministers and colleagues. A couple of Prime Minister's spokespersons have risen to a celebrity 'top banana' status:

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[47] A senior government communicator said to me in an interview that government communicators in the UK "ask ministers…twice a year to feed back on their experiences working with government communications, so they are ultimately…our client" (G. C., personal communication, April 28, 2015).

Margaret Thatcher's Press Secretary Bernhard Ingham and Tony Blair's Press Secretary Alastair Campbell wielded exceptional power, influenced major policy decisions, and were often seen as speaking on behalf of the whole government (Franklin, 1994; Gaber, 2004).

Government communicators who occupy Senior Civil Service positions and work with ministers need to negotiate complicated relationships between civil servants and politicians. In the UK, ministers are seen as being accountable to Parliament for everything that happens in their departments. Therefore, as some critics have pointed out, civil servants tend to lack a sense of personal responsibility for their actions. For example, the Institute for Public Policy Research has suggested that

> the doctrine of ministerial responsibility engenders an accountability-deficit in British government. It allows Ministers and civil servants to "duck and dive" behind one another… Ministers often feel aggrieved for having to take responsibility for everything that takes place in their large and complex departments, while civil servants use the doctrine of ministerial responsibility to avoid having to be held to account. (House of Commons, 2007, section 3, para. 6)

Ruling politicians expect that government communicators – like all the other civil servants in their departments – do their job in such ways that do not irritate the public: they should not attract blame to government by wasting money (politicians like to show that their departments are efficient) or by failing to achieve certain policy goals (politicians want to be seen as always being in control and successful). At the same time, however, government communicators may be treated by the 'top bananas' essentially as professional providers of 'blame shields', or, in some cases, as useful free 'extensions' of their political party's communication machineries. The attempts by ministers and their political advisers to use public resources – the work of government employees and the money from the state budget – for the purposes of party political propaganda have attracted particularly intense public criticism. Moreover, the conflictual relationships between temporary and permanent officeholders in the backstage of government have been famously caricatured and satirised in popular media, for example, in the BBC television series *Yes Minister* and *The Thick of It*, that seem to shape and reinforce the popular perception of bureaucrats

as self-interested actors who engage in sinister machinations (van Zoonen & Wring, 2012).

Within the British political tradition, a peculiar way of responding to larger waves of criticism targeted at government communication has been to launch an official investigation into various problems related to its practices, often carried out in the aftermath of some political scandal. Between 1997 and 2011, eleven investigations were initiated by the Parliament or the government, scrutinising the ways government communication was organised and performed, and the kinds of relations permanent government communicators had with politicians, political advisers, and journalists (Sanders, 2013). Blurring of government and party communications was one of the concerns that came up in several of these reports and it is still a source of significant tensions in the field (Gregory, 2012).[48]

The adoption of written communication guidelines and codes of conduct may be seen as one of the responses to the criticisms and tensions outlined above. The professional guidelines produced by the UK Cabinet Office include, among others, documents that prescribe to all government communicators in Britain specific sets of (1) general standards of propriety, i.e., directions as to how they should conduct themselves in their day-to-day work, (2) professional skills – abilities, competencies, knowledge – that they have to possess when employed in a particular position in a government agency, and (3) ways in which they should evaluate their communication activity (Cabinet Office, 2012, 2013, 2014). Notably, the authorship of these texts is usually not attributed to particular individuals: each of these has most likely been written and reviewed by several people working within government. Thus the guidelines seemingly embody 'objective' (i.e., non-personalised and therefore supposedly unbiased) technical knowledge of what government communicators are expected to do: how they should carry out their work, what kind of knowledge they should seek, and what kind of professional relationships and attitudes they should develop.

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[48] For example, the Mountfield Report of 1997 admitted that government communication may sometimes carry political advantages for the party in power, and stressed the importance of having ethical guidelines for government communication activity (House of Commons, 1998). A report by the Committee on Standards in Public Life (2003) called for guidance clarifying the complicated relationship between politically appointed special advisers who advise ministers in the interests of their political party, and civil servant communicators who are expected to remain politically impartial. The Phillis Report of 2004 recommended that Civil Service impartiality should be reinforced to rebuild the trust that had been broken down between government, politicians, the media, and the public (Phillis, 2004).

A senior UK government communicator (G. C.), whom I interviewed for this study, explained that the guidelines are used for training newly appointed government communicators: They attend an induction programme where

> everybody has an introduction on propriety, everybody has an introduction on the Civil Service Code, everybody has an introduction on the GCS [Government Communication Service] Handbook. Those three are the kind of corner stones of the behaviours that we expect. (G. C., personal communication, April 28, 2015)

My interviewee also said that while the Government Communication Service team at the Cabinet Office tries to coordinate and monitor the implementation of the guidelines by professional communicators across government departments, the duty to ensure compliance with the guidelines lies primarily with the Director of Communications of each department.

While explicitly targeting government employees, the guidelines have been made accessible on the public website of the Government Communication Service, so it may be argued that to some extent the documents serve the purpose of managing the public impression of the communication profession in the British government. Guidelines may function as (semi-)formal devices of managing both politicians' and citizens' expectations towards the behaviour of government communicators. The guidelines position government communicators in relation to other groups both inside the government (ministers, special advisers, civil servants) and outside the government (legislators, journalists, political opposition) by describing in which ways they are similar or dissimilar.

In the following section, I first discuss some discursive characteristics of these documents, and then examine more closely certain potentially defensive strategies within the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* – a document that deals most directly with the professional ethics of government communicators in the UK and hence addresses certain acts that may be considered blameworthy in their field. An important assumption I make in my analysis is that when government communicators write such guidelines on professional conduct, they necessarily pay attention (more or less consciously) to the previous experiences they and the fellow members of their community of practice have acquired throughout their working lives

– including experiences of being blamed for doing or not doing certain things. In other words, the producers of the professional guidelines enact their occupational habitus and seek to construct a positive professional identity for themselves and their ingroup. In the process, they employ certain discursive strategies that may be interpreted as defensive moves meant to minimise the field-specific blame risks. Hence, I approach these documents as useful empirical data that contain discursive traces of anticipative blame avoidance.[49]

6.2 'The border of propriety': Blame avoidance in the UK government communication guidelines

The producers of the professional guidelines seem to anticipate potential blame in two interwoven ways. First, they use language to construct a positive (i.e., blameless, virtuous) professional identity for their ingroup, presumably thereby discouraging potential blame makers from expressing their criticism. Second, linguistic features of the guidelines help protect the officeholders from future blame attacks by discursively constraining their field of action and limiting their perceived causal agency – and hence also their blameworthiness whenever something goes wrong.

If examined through the lens of blame/avoidance, the discursive construction of a positive professional identity basically involves the use of linguistic resources (e.g., lexical choices, discursive strategies) to depict certain social actors as belonging to a unique category of experts who do highly skilled work that serves an important social function – and who therefore deserve public praise rather than blame. As is the case with any kind of group identity building, language is used to demarcate the lines of difference between an ingroup and an outgroup, between 'Us' and 'Them' (De Fina, 2011; Wodak, 2011). On the one hand, this involves *strategies of assimilating*: for

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[49] For a researcher, it seems, it would not be feasible to ask the writers of these guidelines which elements in the guidelines were meant to be defensive (these people are not accessible, and would most likely deny that any of their discursive choices were related to avoiding blame). Therefore, an indirect way to identify defensiveness in the language of the guidelines is to study the field-specific blame risks, that is, to find out about the histories of attacks and controversies that government communicators have had to endure in the past, and then try to identify the particular discursive strategies used in the guidelines in relation to these risks. My understanding of the field-specific blame risks derives in part from my personal experience: Before I began working on this thesis, I was employed as a civil servant at a government office for 10 years and participated in the writing of several communication guidelines for civil servants.

example, calculated ways of naming (referential or nominational strategies) that are used for membership categorisation, and particular ways of representing social actors that are used for collectivising them. On the other hand, this involves *strategies of dissimilating:* for example, adversarial framing of a discursively constructed outgroup as a Villain and the ingroup as a Hero or a Victim.[50]

The perception of agency for potentially negative future deeds or outcomes can be anticipatively manipulated by using a variety of linguistic strategies which I have already described in Chapter 4: strategic ways of *arguing* (e.g., appeals to law), *framing* (e.g., depicting someone else as a Villain), *denying* (e.g., control-denial), *representing social actors and actions* (e.g., collectivising actors, deagentialising actions), and *legitimising* (e.g., referring to an impersonal authority). In addition, *ambiguity* of the guidelines can serve the purpose of limiting blame, sometimes possibly allowing government communicators to bypass their professional propriety rules without punishment.

The general defensive disposition of officeholders is sometimes rather explicitly indicated in the text of the guidelines by what I call the *lexis of blame/avoidance* – evaluative nouns (e.g., 'problem', 'issue', 'obstacle'), and adjectives (e.g., 'negative', 'improper') that are used to categorise particular ways of acting or particular situations as undesirable: as threats to the positive self-images of government communicators both individually and as a collective group. Related to this, *imperative language* – dos and don'ts – is used to direct and constrain certain aspects of the future behaviour of government communicators so that they would supposedly be less likely to attract blame.

Below I present a more detailed analysis of the discursive constructions of the government communicators' professional identity and their main blame risks, together with concrete textual examples taken from the communication propriety guidelines of the UK Coalition government.

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[50] Strategies of assimilating and dissimilating have been previously described by Wodak, de Cillia, Reisigl, & Liebhart (2009) in relation to the discursive construction of national identities. I use the notions of Villain, Victim, and Hero following Lakoff (2008) to refer to the stereotypical characters of a narrative frame that often underpins people's attributions of blame and praise.

Constructing a professional identity

Appeals to unique expertise and professionalism may be interpreted as defensive rhetorical moves that people in various occupational domains employ to claim autonomy and avoid blame. Professionalisation of an occupation could be defined as "a process of social crystallisation of expertise allowing the expert to 'practice in peace'" (Fournier 1999, p. 302). The production of various complex codes and guidelines for government employees fulfils the function of signalling their professionalism – and thus also their claim for higher prestige in society.

The authors of the guidelines have foregrounded expertise by increasing the complexity of the texts – and thereby possibly excluding potential 'non-expert' readers. First, the texts often mention various other codes, guidelines and legal acts that government communicators are expected to familiarise themselves with and adhere to.[51] For example, the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* (Cabinet Office, 2014) includes, among others, references to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, the Civil Service Code, the Ministerial Code, election and referenda guidance, guidance for departments on sponsorship, social media guidance for civil servants, Government Communication Service evaluation guidance, Efficiency and Reform Group Advertising, Marketing and Communications Request Form Guidance, the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom's Broadcasting Code, the Contempt of Court Act 1981, the Children and Young Persons Act, the Data Protection Act, the Freedom of Information Act, the Welsh Language Act 1993, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, and the guidance on copyright in works commissioned by the Crown.

Unsurprisingly, the propositions in the guidelines most commonly rely on the *topos of law* – an argumentative shortcut that (implicitly) says that "if a law or otherwise codified norm prescribes or forbids a specific politico-administrative action, the action has to be performed or omitted" (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 79). This flood of explicit intertextual references may leave a reader with an impression that nearly every aspect

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[51] Indeed, some degree of explicit intertextuality is necessary in most kinds of government documents. However, non-expert readers may easily feel overwhelmed when presented with too many references to other texts.

of the work of government communication professionals is carefully legally or officially regulated – and therefore perhaps less open to critical reflection.

Second, the guidelines make use of profession-specific acronyms and jargon. Here is an example from the *Propriety Guidance*:

(1)   Now in its fourth edition, the DM Code is the direct marketing industry's most far-reaching set of best practice guidelines, incorporating the CAP Codes, PhonepayPlus Code of Practice, and FSA Principles for Businesses, as well as   relevant legislation.

It is presumed that government communicators as expert readers know what 'DM', 'CAP', 'PhonepayPlus' and 'FSA' stand for. The use of unconventional lexis serves to underline the specialised knowledge that the intended readers allegedly possess, and sets them apart from 'non-expert' outgroups.

The construction of professional identity in the text of the guidelines also involves the employment of a variety of categorisation and assimilation devices. The idea that individuals who communicate on behalf of the government belong to a certain category (e.g., 'government communicators', 'civil servants', members of their respective departments, or advisers to their respective ministers) can be either foregrounded or backgrounded, leading to different understandings of their loyalties and obligations.

Throughout the guidance documents produced by the Cabinet Office, government communicators are represented as a unified and unique group of positive actors. First of all, the use of the collective reference 'government communicators' (and in some cases also 'media officers' as their sub-group) is salient in all of the official texts. This seems to carry a less negative connotation compared to other possible ways of referring to government employees charged with public communication tasks, e.g., 'public relations practitioners', 'discourse technologists', or 'spin doctors'. The latter terms are used by various critical commentators often interchangeably as (near) synonyms to refer to such officeholders. The same applies to the singular label 'government communication' that is used to refer to the profession and the plural 'government communications' that signifies the content or the 'output' of their work: these may be regarded as having a more positive ring to them compared to, for

instance, 'government public relations', 'political marketing', or 'government propaganda' that are often found in academic literature.

Second, the fact that 'government communicators' belong to Civil Service may be more or less foregrounded in the text. In some of the guidelines, the label 'civil servants' is at times used interchangeably with 'government communicators'. For example, on page 3 of the *Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance* it says:

(2)   This guidance has been developed by the Government Communication Service to inform <u>all government communicators</u> of their responsibilities and provide advice for specific situations they may encounter.

On the next page, however, it says:

Government Communication Service Propriety Guidance defines how <u>civil servants</u> can properly and effectively present the policies and programmes of the government of the day.

On some occasions, 'government communicators' are explicitly framed as a sub-category of 'civil servants'. This seems to be mainly used as a part of emphasising their dissimilarity with politicians. Here is a sentence from the *Propriety Guidance* that illustrates this:

(3)   Like all civil servants, government communicators must maintain a professional distance from ministers and abide by the Civil Service Code at all times.

While this directive sounds unmitigated ("must...at all times"), the meaning of "professional distance" is not explained in the texts, thereby leaving more room for ambiguous interpretations.[52]

Furthermore, government communicators may be assimilated with the departments where they are employed, that is, the central government organisations led by ministers. The following extract from the *Propriety Guidance* shows how the 'department' is at first attached to media officers by the use of possessive pronoun

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[52] Arguably, some vagueness is necessary in such guidelines, as it provides space for officials' use of discretion in unforeseeable situations. However, the use of vague expressions could also mean that the producers of the text are trying to avoid or background a problematic or controversial topic.

('their departments'), and then used so that it effectively stands for 'media officers' due to cohesion.

(4)   It is the duty of media officers to present the policies of <u>their department</u> to the public through the media and to try to ensure that they are understood. … The Government has the right to expect <u>the department</u> to further its policies and objectives, regardless of how politically controversial they might be.

The systematic use of the discursive strategies of assimilation – constructing individual employees as inseparable from collective bodies such as 'government communicators', 'civil servants', and 'departments' – has at least two effects in terms of blame avoidance. First, it results in a perceived sense of belonging and peer support that helps each individual employee in the constructed professional community to better resist external blame attacks. And second, the de-personalised and (variously) collectivised social actor representation means that responsibility for problems that may occur can be more easily diffused and blame attributions are more likely to seem less targeted.

Distinguishing between government communicators and 'politicians'

Dissimilating government communicators from politicians – ministers, ministers' political advisers, and party political spokespeople – is a central theme in the communication guidelines produced by the Cabinet Office. I use the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance*'s section titled 'Dealing with ministers' to illustrate some of the ways in which dissimilating is linguistically realised.

(5)   1   Ministers don't always acknowledge the distinction between
       2   government communicators and their own party political spokespeople.
       3   Consequently, ministers may sometimes ask the Press Office to issue
       4   or further distribute through departmental digital channels
       5   speeches or statements that cross the border of propriety.
       6   In such cases, it is right to explore whether a compromise can be reached
       7   that will not breach propriety.
       8   If no such compromise can be found, then it will be necessary
       9   to give a polite refusal which, if necessary, will be
       10   supported by the department's Permanent Secretary or Chief Executive.

In lines 1–2, ministers are described as liable to conflating the roles of departmental and party spokespeople. Ministers are thus framed as potential Villains, because they "don't always acknowledge the distinction" that is admittedly central to the positive professional identity of government communicators. In lines 3–5, ministers are described as liable to ask government communicators to behave in inappropriate ways. This further reinforces the negative portrayal of ministers as Villains who are predisposed to "cross the border of propriety".

Lines 6–7 are notably vague and abstract: all actors have been deleted and the possible course of action is suggested in a non-imperative way. Instead of giving an authoritative instruction (e.g., "do not breach propriety!") the authors of the guidance have resorted to a notably ambivalent descriptive statement: "it is right to explore whether a compromise can be reached that will not breach propriety." This formulation could be seen as telling evidence of the problematic power relations between ministers and government communicators: the former may sometimes misbehave but the latter cannot easily oppose or 'defeat' them because of the subordinate position of government communicators in the departmental hierarchy. Government communicators may attempt to save their face when dealing with a 'villainous' minister by negotiating a "compromise" (line 6) or delivering a "polite refusal" (line 9), and sometimes seeking additional support from the highest non-elected officeholders in the organisation (line 10).

What kinds of speeches or statements by ministers are seen as "crossing the border of propriety"? An example of this is provided in the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance.*

(6) 1 For example, if a speech by a minister included an attack on their
     2 political opponents, it would be improper for the department to issue it
     3 as an official text. The political attack would have to be omitted from the
     4 official release. If the minister wished the full speech to be issued,
     5 it would have to come from the press office of the political party.

The use of the noun 'attack' as a description of what ministers do (lines 1 and 3) evokes the conceptual domain of war.[53] The framing of politics as war is furthered by the use of the phrase 'political battle' in the following excerpt from the *Propriety Guidance*'s section titled 'Announcing new policies'.

(7)   1   In the sense that government communicators work

       2   directly with and for ministers who are politically motivated,

       3   government communications cannot be free of political content.

       4   But at all times it is essential to remember that, as civil servants,

       5   government communicators cannot join the political battle.

       6   Government communicators regardless of discipline should do nothing that

       7   leaves ministers and the department open to criticism in this respect.

Even though it is explicitly stated that "government communicators work directly with and for ministers" (lines 1–2), I suggest that the metaphor POLITICS IS WAR is used here as a crucial linguistic device for setting politicians further apart from government communicators. Government communicators may have to deal with "political content" (line 3) but need to stay clear of "political attacks" and the "political battle" (line 5) perpetrated by the "politically motivated" (line 2) ministers. The use of the war metaphor frames ministers as aggressive warmongers. Government communicators, on the other hand, may be perceived by implication as 'non-combatants' because they are advised to steer away from conflict. Notably, the adjective 'political' is 'not defined anywhere in the guidelines, so its meaning remains ambiguous, but due to its use within a war metaphor and as an essential attribute of politicians as Villains, it acquires a strongly negative connotation. 'Political' things seem to generate blame and should be avoided. By indirectly denouncing "politically motivated" behaviour, government communicators distance themselves from politicians and their actions.

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[53] Charteris-Black (2004) concluded in his study that the domain of conflict (indicated by words such as 'fight' and 'battle') was the most common source domain of metaphors identified in his corpus of British party political manifestos since the end of the Second World War. He suggested that "politicians employ conflict metaphors because they highlight the personal sacrifice and physical struggle that is necessary to achieve social goals" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. 69). Given the POLITICS IS WAR metaphor, "society can be seen as composed of armies that correspond to political groups; the leaders of the armies correspond to political leaders; the weapons used by the army are the ideas and policies of the political groups; the objective of the war is some political goal, and so on" (Kövecses, 2002, p. 62).

In lines 6–7, the guidance given to government communicators is remarkably vague and ambivalent. What might, for example, "leaving ministers open to criticism" exactly involve? According to one possible reading, government communicators are constructed as being fully responsible for defending ministers against public blame by *not* joining their 'political battle'. The unexpressed premise of this is that in any case it will be the minister who will be criticised whenever a government communicator in her department engages in a 'political battle'. Another interpretation could be that communicators have to *avoid any behaviour* ("should do nothing") that could attract blame to ministers and departments. However, the full extent and nature of the forbidden actions (i.e., blame risks) remain implicit – these are treated as part of the tacit professional knowledge (i.e., habitus).

6.3 Interpreting the discursive underpinnings of 'operational' blame avoidance

Above, I have examined the professional guidelines that deal with certain aspects of government communication that may be called 'operational': The written guidance pertains to the practical decisions as to what government communicators should or should not do within their professional capacity. Hood (2011) claims that some of the most common operational approaches to limiting blame in public administration include what he calls 'protocolisation' and 'herding'. *Protocolisation* refers to officeholders' anticipative strategy of avoiding blame by rigid rule-following, thereby limiting the perception of individual agency.

> Rather than allowing common sense or ad hoc professional judgment to govern what is to be done, appropriate behaviour is stipulated by formulae, algorithms, computer programs, best practice guidelines, or other kinds of rules, turning human functionaries into some approximation of robots. (Hood, 2011, p. 93)

Herding means "always doing things in groups in some way, so that no one individual or organisation can be singled out for blame as deviant, and potential blame takers can find strength in numbers" (Hood, 2011, p. 92). This kind of collective behaviour may not prevent blame but could make it seem less targeted.

Based on my analysis of the government communication guidelines, I suggest that these two operational strategies of anticipative blame avoidance described by Hood involve not only particular working routines and arrangements but also particular patterns of language use. I conceptualise protocolisation and herding as discursive strategies which can be accomplished (at least partially) in text and talk by employing certain linguistic devices that I have identified in my analysis. I present a heuristic model for interpreting these strategies in Table 6.1 below.

Protocolisation as a discursive strategy of blame avoidance is realised, in the first place, by producing and referring to written operational guidelines and standards. Within these documents, imperative language is used to direct and constrain certain aspects of the behaviour of government communicators. Propositions in the documents are based on appeals to various official rules and legal acts (topos of law), and particular courses of action are legitimised with references to impersonal authority. Officeholders are framed as devoted rule-followers, and thus their control over possibly blameworthy outcomes can be denied (control-denial) as they are seemingly 'left with no choice' in carrying out their tasks.

Herding is realised discursively by employing strategies of assimilating and dissimilating. Strategies of assimilating are aimed at linguistically establishing similarity, unity, homogeneity among government communicators, and further among departments and all civil servants, thereby making it easier to diffuse blame within the professional community and reduce personal responsibility for possible failures. This includes representing potential blame takers as collectivised and functionalised actors (e.g., 'government communicators'), emphasising their high social status (e.g., by using field-specific acronyms and jargon), basing argumentative propositions on appeals to expertise and professionalism, and legitimising actions based on conformity (e.g., one should behave 'like all civil servants'). Strategies of dissimilating are aimed at linguistically constructing differences between government communicators and the 'others' (e.g., 'politicians', 'ministers', 'special advisers'), thereby allowing the former to deflect blame for certain problems by directing (at least some of) it to individuals or groups outside their community of practice. Particular practices are discouraged among the members of the 'herd' by using negative comparison with those who are constructed as 'others' (and sometimes framed as Villains), for instance, politicians who engage in 'political battle' (moral evaluation legitimation).

Table 6.1. Anticipative discursive strategies of blame avoidance in bureaucratic operational guidelines

	Protocolisation	Herding
General description	Rejecting (some of) the causal agency for negative deeds or outcomes by claiming to be strictly following the rules	Making blame seem less targeted by spreading causal agency for negative deeds or outcomes among many actors
Ways of arguing	Topos of law	Topos of expertise/ professionalism
Ways of framing	Framing oneself as a rule-follower	Framing oneself as a member of a group of Heroes or Victims (and possibly framing 'others' as Villains)
Ways of denying	Control-denial	Control-denial
Ways of representing social actors and actions	Deagentialising actions Collectivising and functionalising oneself	Collectivising and functionalising oneself
Ways of legitimising	Impersonal authority legitimation	Conformity legitimation Moral evaluation legitimation (negative comparison with 'others')

Herding and protocolisation as discursive strategies of anticipative blame avoidance are similar as far as the ways of denying and the ways of representing social actors are concerned. Both strategies entail denying officeholder's individual control/agency (in case of protocolisation, the control supposedly lies elsewhere, e.g., with the legislators; in case of herding, the agency is spread among many actors) and both entail collectivising and functionalising officeholders (in case of protocolisation, as 'rule-followers'; in case of herding, as 'government communicators', 'departments', or 'civil servants'), thereby making it easier to reduce personal liability for possible failures.

Admittedly, protocolisation and herding should not be regarded as fundamentally 'evil' practices. Officeholders generally act with good intentions when they refer to rules or try to foster a sense of professional collegiality. However, strategic blame avoidance

may sometimes amount to discursive power abuse: communicative manipulation.[54] For example, protocolisation could be seen as manipulative if officeholders calculatedly overemphasise the extent to which the work of government communication professionals is rigidly regulated. The commands in the documents may be deliberately constructed in ambiguous, mitigated, and suggestive ways, hence actually allowing officeholders much more discretion over what course of action to pursue in concrete situations. Discursive herding strategy could be manipulative if officeholders systematically omit or blur information about salient differences among the members of a professional ingroup and their actions. Within the government communication profession – and within the civil service for that matter – individual officeholders may belong to separate 'blame worlds' and have different reasons and resources for engaging in discursive self-defence or image-making. In the same vein, overemphasising the 'professional distance' between executive politicians and government communicators could be misleading, because they may at times be driven by rather similar incentives and interests.

6.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I explored how government communication guidelines could be interpreted as discursive devices of anticipative blame avoidance. To analyse the text of the guidelines in terms of defensive strategies used by their producers, one has to begin by exploring the blame risks that government communicators might face in particular situations. Government communicators in the UK are caught in a blame 'crossfire' that has multiple historical and institutional sources. They are likely to be criticised over various shortcomings traditionally associated with bureaucracy and public relations. Moreover, they have to survive in the midst of the often conflicting demands of the constantly competing politicians and the public expectation of a politically neutral civil service.

Hence, blame avoidance could be seen as a core ingredient of the occupational habitus of government communicators. They do not use discursive strategies of blame

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[54] For a discussion of what may constitute 'manipulation' in discourse, see van Dijk (2006). He suggests that manipulators seek to (re)produce their power by controlling the formation of the socially shared commonsensical frames of interpretation in ways that hurt the interests of less powerful groups.

avoidance only reactively, that is, in immediate response to an individual, clearly targeted accusation of causing something negative. Defensive language use is often anticipative, part of the everyday operating routines, calculated to preemptively manipulate the perception of officeholders' individual control over possibly negative actions or outcomes.

Professional guidelines produced by and for government communicators as a community of practice should be seen as enactments of their habitus, means of constructing their professional identities, and devices of limiting potential blame risks. The authors of the guidelines anticipate blame in two interwoven ways. First, they use language to construct a positive (i.e., blameless, virtuous) professional identity for their ingroup by emphasising their expertise and distancing themselves from (presumably bad) 'political battles'. Second, they use protocolisation and herding as discursive strategies of collectivising and functionalising officeholders, thereby minimising the perception of their personal causal agency.

7. Defensive semiotic strategies in government:
A multimodal study of blame avoidance

In the previous three chapters, I have mainly explored the linguistic aspects of blame avoidance in government, that is, officeholders' defensive uses of verbal language. In this chapter, I continue my investigation into anticipative blame avoidance in the backstage of government communication (RQ 3), but I try to look beyond spoken and written texts, and interpret defensive moves from the perspectives of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1969) and multimodality (van Leeuwen, 2014).

Applying an analogy between life and theatre, and focusing on how individuals present themselves to others, seems to be a useful approach to understanding blame avoidance in organisations. The study of people's performances and impression management in everyday life was pioneered by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1969) and his analytic concepts have later been successfully applied to describe and explain organisational and political linguistic behaviour (e.g., Wodak, 2011).

From this dramaturgical point of view, blame phenomena can be best grasped by conducting ethnographic micro-sociological studies of face-to-face interactions as *performances* by which certain people as 'actors' try to influence the other participants, particular audiences, or observers. Researchers who adopt this approach try to understand how social relationships, social order and organisation are routinely performed and sustained not only by verbal interaction, but also by a set of 'expressive equipment' that Goffman (1969) calls 'front'. Front includes, most importantly, setting of the performance (location, physical layout, props), appearance of the performer (characteristics that signal her social status, for example, clothes and insignia of office) and her manner (facial expressions and body movements that indicate her interactional role, for example, as someone who is domineering, obedient, or angry).

In the context of executive government, it may be presumed that dealing with blame risk takes different forms depending on whether the officeholders are communicating publicly, that is, making their text, talk, and other symbolic resources accessible to a mass audience (e.g., giving a televised interview) or acting in a relatively more bounded space (e.g., a professional training event) where access is restricted to a finite

number of authorised participants who mainly belong to the same professional community or team as the performers themselves. The latter space, as noted earlier, can be conceptualised as backstage: a region where officeholders are more likely to relax, step out of character, and discuss and practice their public performances without the need to worry about being observed – and possibly criticised – by external audiences (Goffman, 1969). In front of an audience, however, officeholders are keen to control the information they give out about themselves. They highlight certain positive aspects that they want the audience to notice ('dramatic realisation' in Goffman's terms), and try to present a consistent, 'idealised' version of themselves and their actions. This involves omitting or backgrounding 'dirty' (problematic, ugly, possibly illegal) aspects of their work, and maintaining social distance with the members of the audience to 'mystify' them.[55] Idealising and mystifying, I suggest, are the central features of officeholders' anticipative blame avoidance behaviour.

The dramatic performances of government officeholders can be analysed in great detail in terms of how they deploy a range of multimodal semiotic resources, such as written and spoken language, still and moving images, acting, clothing, music, and so forth, to avoid, limit, or shift blame. In the following section, I discuss the affordances (i.e., perceived meaning potentials in particular situations) and possible strategic applications of some of these, with a special focus on the defensive uses of non-verbal resources. My aim is to extend the heuristic framework of discursive strategies of blame avoidance proposed in Chapter 4 by considering non-verbal ways of representing social actors and actions, framing, arguing, and legitimising. I apply these analytic categories to interpret the data I gathered during an observation of a major training event of British government communicators in June 2014.

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[55] Notably, the distinction between backstage and frontstage is not always evident; people can invoke typical front or backstage behaviour in various interactional situations and in a variety of places. For example, officeholders may choose to speak and act in backstage in very formal, rehearsed ways to show off their acting skills or to keep up the morale of fellow actors between their frontstage performances. When the border between back and front seems blurred, people may choose to adopt what has been called 'sidestage' (or 'middle region') behaviour patterns that combine elements of both typical front and backstage activity (Meyrowitz, 1985). Moreover, the presence of a researcher can induce a change in the 'normal' backstage behaviour – a phenomenon which ethnographers call the 'observer effect' (for a critical discussion of this notion, see Monahan & Fisher, 2010).

7.1 Multimodal approaches to blame avoidance

Ways of representing actors and actions

When social actions – including wrongdoings – are represented by semiotic resources, the actual concrete actors, actions, settings, causal links, and so forth, are all transformed in certain ways: they are 'recontextualised' (van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; see also Machin, 2013). In their performances (where they use text, talk, images, etc.), officeholders can carry out some of these transformations strategically to defend themselves against receiving blame for their transgressions or failures. Drawing on van Leeuwen and Wodak (1999) and the insights from my first pilot study, I suggest that such defensive transformations may include:

- *deleting* verbal, visual, and other references to perpetrators; omitting representations of (possible) victims as well as any loss or suffering caused by the perpetrators; excluding references to any transgressions or negative characteristics of the possible blame takers;

- *adding* linguistic, visual, and other cues that (a) emphasise the positive characteristics of a possibly negative event (e.g., by providing explanations and justifications) and/or the positive characteristics of a blameworthy agent, and (b) shift the audience's attention away from a particular negative event and/or a particular blameworthy agent;

- *rearranging* the sequence of represented events so that a particular negative outcome seems not to have resulted from a particular officeholder's (in)action; rearranging the social relations between potential blame makers and officeholders (e.g., portraying more powerful actors as less powerful);

- *substituting* the actual elements of a potentially blameworthy social practice with representations that are designed to background certain negative meanings and relations, and thereby limit the audience's blame-generating desire (e.g., using euphemisms, linguistic and visual metaphors, abstract pictures, general diagrams, or decontextualised statistical figures to refer to concrete wrongdoings of a particular officeholder, or to concrete individuals who suffer as a consequence of these wrongdoings); replacing the act of doing something problematic (e.g., wasting money) with an act of doing something good (e.g., helping others) or perhaps even heroic (e.g., saving lives).

To mitigate blame risk, officeholders may try to convey or support an impression that possibly negative events or circumstances that could attract blame are 'less real', while the potentially praiseworthy aspects of their character and actions are 'more real'. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) remind us that the truth value or credibility of statements – that is, their 'modality' – can be linguistically marked by the speaker's use of auxiliary verbs (e.g., 'may', 'will', 'must'), adjectives (e.g., 'certain', 'probable', 'possible') and tense (past claims seem less true than the present ones), by formulating the claims either as subjective ideas or objective facts (e.g., 'they think that...' versus 'in fact,...'), and by labelling claims with qualifying terms such as 'belief' or 'reality'. Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that people use modality markers in visual communication, too. However, what counts as 'more real' depends on what kind of socially and historically developed 'standard of reality' a particular audience subscribes to. For example, some scientifically minded viewers may regard an abstract diagram as 'more real' than a photograph, because the former captures the essence and generality of the phenomenon whereas the latter merely depicts its surface. One's preferred standard of reality serves as an indicator of group membership and social status.

> Modality both realises and produces social affinity, through aligning the viewer (or reader, or listener) with certain forms of representation, namely those with which the artist (or speaker, or writer) aligns himself or herself, and not with others. Modality realises what 'we' consider true or untrue, real or not real. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 171)

If officeholders want their visual messages to be persuasive, they need to tailor these to fit the 'coding preferences' of the particular audience at hand. Arguably, sociocultural elites are expected to show a preference for abstract coding that is characteristic to academic and scientific contexts. For such people, "modality is higher the more an image reduces the individual to the general, and the concrete to its essential qualities", and engaging with abstract images, either as a producer or consumer, "is a mark of social distinction, of being an 'educated person' or a 'serious artist'" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 165). Abstractness is opposed to 'photographic naturalism' in visual depiction, and a gradual distinction between these can be made on the basis of a number of modality markers: extreme abstractness is characterised by the lack of colour (only black and white are used), contextualisation

(there is no background), representation (there is very little pictorial detail), depth (there is no perspective), illumination (there is no play of light and shade), and brightness (only two degrees of brightness are used).

I suggest that the affordances of abstractness in visual representation can be exploited by officeholders who seek to avoid criticism. First, decontextualised abstract depictions allow to *background or omit possibly blameworthy aspects* of particular decisions or events and make these seem less concrete (e.g., suffering individuals can be represented as a line or a bar on a chart, thereby collectivising and anonymising individual victims). Second, the use of abstract images in communication may constitute an attempt to imbue certain statements with the quality of being 'scientific': This could be seen as a *visual appeal to expertise* when officeholders are denying, justifying, or excusing possibly blameworthy acts or outcomes. Third, abstractness in visual communication could be interpreted (at least by certain audiences) as an *indicator of high social status* and exclusiveness of the communicator: characteristics that may, in some instances, reduce the audience's motivation for critical reflection and blame generation.

Ways of framing and positioning

One of the most remarkable affordances of recontextualising is that people can be represented by types or roles that fit nicely into well-known storylines. As already noted in Chapter 4, people often attribute blame and praise in terms of a basic narrative frame that may be called 'Rescue narrative' (Lakoff, 2008, p. 24). According to this narrative frame, an (inherently evil) Villain harms a (helpless and innocent) Victim, then an (inherently good) Hero struggles against and defeats the Villain, so consequently the Victim is rescued, the Villain punished, and the Hero rewarded. Accordingly, avoiding blame means avoiding being represented – verbally or visually – as a Villain in stories about (possible) harm or loss. Officeholders who confront a blame risk may promptly try to present themselves as the Heroes, or the Helpers of a Hero, or the Victims, or perhaps as the ones who play no part whatsoever in the story at hand, all the while carefully avoiding giving out any verbal or non-verbal cues that would suggest that they could fit in the role of a Villain.

Officeholders may use certain non-verbal attributes and techniques (e.g., looking similar to the audience members, speaking with a similar voice, saluting the national flag) to try to evoke a sense of having a common ground with the particular audience at hand, of belonging to the same ingroup – and by inference, of not being a Villain. Presumably, blame sticks more easily to those actors who seem to belong to an outgroup, who seem to be 'not one of us' and possess stereotypically negative attributes. Thus for their blame avoiding performance to be a success, the performers must first develop a good understanding of the values, preferences and expectations of their audience members.

When acting as participants in performances, officeholders can assume different speaker roles. Goffman (1981) refers to such positioning behaviour as taking a 'footing' and distinguishes between three speaker roles: a Principal, who is responsible for a particular message; an Author, who creates the content and form of a message; and an Animator, who actually produces an utterance. An officeholder may choose not to fulfil all the three roles simultaneously but rather assume a role that helps to minimise her blame risk. Strategic footing shifts could serve the purpose of limiting blameworthiness by manipulating the perceived agency (control and obligation) of the speaker. An officeholder may, for example, claim to act as merely a conveyor of bad news ("Don't shoot the messenger!"), or, on another occasion, distance herself from what is being said by exploiting someone else (e.g., a fictional cartoon character, or a hired professional actor in a campaign video) as an animator of some controversial ideas.

Strategic ways of representing and framing actors and actions form the bedrock of multimodal blame avoidance in government. However, we need to look beyond these to understand how officeholders use non-verbal semiotic resources to defend their claim of innocence in potentially controversial situations, or justify their possibly harmful (in)actions.

Ways of arguing

When officeholders put forward self-defensive arguments, their argumentative moves can be intricately coordinated with other elements of their multimodal performances. The verbal and visual modes may interact to increase the force of a potential blame taker's argument that she does not deserve to be blamed. More specifically, non-

verbal resources can be employed to help advance a standpoint with respect to (a) the perceived negativity or otherwise of a particular outcome or behaviour, and (b) the perceived agency of someone or something in causing this. Convincing an audience to withhold blame may thus involve what has been termed 'visual argumentation' (Groarke, 1996; Roque, 2012) or 'multimodal argumentation' (Kjeldsen, 2015; Tseronis, 2015).

Officeholders may use certain multimodal cues as 'proof', that is, as means for defending the standpoint that they are blameless, and for casting doubt on their opponent's standpoint. Notably, officeholders may also attempt shifting blame to someone or something else. As suggested already in Chapter 4, this could involve using fallacious appeals to emotions of the audience, for instance, attacking the opponent's character to discredit her (*argumentum ad hominem*), concluding that a proposition is true because many people believe so (*argumentum ad populum*), appealing to audience's feelings of compassion (*argumentum ad misericordiam*), and providing false analogies. All of these appeals can be triggered or reinforced by the use of images. For instance, *argumentum ad hominem* can be accomplished in a debate by presenting an embarrassing or denigrating photograph of an opponent, *argumentum ad populum* by showing an edited video footage of a vox-pop where 'people on the street' express unanimous support to the proponent's standpoint, *argumentum ad misericordiam* by asking the audience to look at (possibly shocking) imagery of suffering people, and false analogy by displaying pictures of seemingly similar people or events and expecting the audience to infer that these are identical in other aspects besides looks. Such 'strategic manoeuvres' in advancing one's standpoint can be evaluated in terms of to what extent the participants observe the pragma-dialectical standards for reasonableness (van Eemeren & Grootendorst, 1992; van Eemeren, 2010).

In a similar vein, visual cues can be used for the purposes of legitimising, that is, providing explanations and justifications for certain institutional practices.

Ways of legitimising

Legitimising involves admitting full responsibility for a particular behaviour or outcome, but trying to present the situation in a more positive light. Analysis of multimodal legitimation of social practices (van Leeuwen, 2007; Mackay, 2015) can

illuminate some of the semiotic resources officeholders use to construct such justifications.

Drawing on van Leeuwen (2007, p. 92; based on van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999), I suggest that responses to blaming – as well as pre-emptive communication of potentially unwelcome conduct – can contain one or several of the following types of multimodal legitimations:

- *authority legitimation*: using multimodal references to status and role (e.g., uniforms, badges of office or honour), rules (e.g., traffic signs), custom (e.g., video footage of many people engaging in an activity that is claimed to conform with some tradition), or commendation (e.g., images of an expert or a role model acting in a certain way);
- *moral evaluation legitimation*: using multimodal references to value systems (e.g., evoking a comparison between two evaluative images, one of a seemingly 'good' and the other of a seemingly 'bad' person or situation);
- *rationalisation legitimation*: using multimodal references to the instrumental goals, uses and effects of institutionalised social action (e.g., an abstract explanatory scheme or flowchart showing how to reach a particular goal);
- *mythopoesis*: using visual narratives, e.g., cartoons or videos that tell moral or cautionary tales in which legitimate actions are rewarded and non-legitimate actions are punished.

To sum up, my point of departure in analysing anticipative blame avoidance behaviour as performance is this: I presume that in front of various (potentially critical) audiences, government officeholders choose to use certain expressive equipment, such as settings, appearances, manners, and configurations of verbal and non-verbal semiotic strategies, that serve an overall goal of mitigating the ever-looming blame risk. Therefore, when I observed a large professional training event for British government communicators during my fieldwork for this research project, I tried to spot defensive uses of such resources and strategies by the participants.

As explained earlier, defensive elements of officeholders' behaviour can only be understood within their particular historical, institutional, and situational context. Therefore, before engaging with my field data, I provide a brief historical account of the professional training of government officeholders in the UK.

7.2 Professional training and blame avoidance in government

In bureaucratic organisations, managers regard training as a management tool, a form of organisational control. Professional training can be seen as a "disciplinary logic" that is used by employers to "profess 'appropriate' forms of conduct when employees' behaviour cannot be regulated (at least so economically) through direct control" (Fournier, 1999, p. 290). Thus employers provide training because it allows them to guide the behaviour of employees indirectly and more efficiently. Training can help to streamline the work processes by establishing and cementing clear divisions of labour, and by instigating a sense of self-control of workers through their compliance with professional standards. Trainees, on the other hand, engage in the development of their 'professional skills' and 'professional knowledge' because they see this as leading towards a perceived higher social status: the status of a 'professional'.

Undergoing training allows the employees to justify their actions – including those that may attract blame – with an appeal to professionalism and expertise. It also allows them to claim "exclusive ownership of an area of expertise and knowledge, and the power to define the nature of problems in that area as well as the control of access to potential solutions" (Evetts, 2003, p. 407). Professional training plays a role in the formation of officeholders' occupational habitus and the construction of their professional identities. Becoming a member of a unified professional group may increase the officeholders' ability to withstand public criticism when things go wrong. As I already noted in the previous chapter, such defensive behaviour may be called 'herding': "always doing things in groups in some way, so that no one individual or organisation can be singled out for blame as deviant, and potential blame takers can find strength in numbers" (Hood, 2011, p. 92). Professional training programmes of government officials could be interpreted as collective backstage rehearsals of resisting and limiting possible public blame related to various problematic aspects of their work.

The civil servant communicators employed by the UK government departments are subjected to professional training. Attending training is seen as a precondition for advancing to higher positions in the hierarchy (Cabinet Office, 2014). The idea that such an arrangement should be used is not new. In Britain, civil servants have received systematic specialist training at least since the Second World War, and the

extent and importance of formal training programmes has increased over the years (Lowe, 2011). Already in 1933, an influential public relations expert Sir Stephen Tallents asserted that within government, "publicity should be recognised as a professional job, demanding special training and special capacities" (Tallents, 1933, p. 265). Bernard Ingham, who became the Chief Press Secretary of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's office in 1979, introduced internal quality standards and formal training for government publicity officials. Since the mid-2000s, in line with the overall drive for 'professionalisation' of the public relations practitioners in private corporations, the British government has adopted strategic 'development frameworks': official documents that determine the 'core skills and knowledge requirements' for government communicators (Gregory, 2006).

A 2013 incarnation of the document, titled *Government Communication Professional Competency Framework*, was devised in the aftermath of the financial crisis that emerged in the UK in the late 2000s. The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government that took office in 2010 announced spending cuts, including cuts to the communication budget. A senior government communication official explained to me that

> because we couldn't justify the investment we were making in communications, we had to get rid of fifty percent of staff. And we had a marketing freeze. Freeze in spending. And then we also had a spending controls programme introduced. (G. C., personal communication, April 28, 2015)

The coalition regarded the development of competences and skills of government communicators as a way to reduce overall communication costs of the government. Accordingly, the document stipulates that all communicators have to possess the skills and knowledge necessary to "ensure communication products are cost effective and delivered to a high quality, representing value for money" (Cabinet Office, 2013, p. 15). However, specifically for press and media officers in government, defensive reputation management is also listed as one of the core competencies: They are expected to know how to "develop strategies to protect and improve corporate and Government reputation" (Cabinet Office, 2013, p. 11).

Based on the competency framework, the Cabinet Office runs streams of professional training events. In June 2014, I was able to attend one of the largest of these events – the Public Sector Communications Academy – and carry out a participant observation.

7.3 Multimodal defensive performances at the Public Sector Communications Academy

The training event that I observed took place in a large conference venue, Renold Building, at the University of Manchester on 12 June 2014. More than 250 participants from various central and local government departments gathered for what was branded by the organisers as 'the first ever joint public relations conference between local and central government'. The training event was organised by Cabinet Office-led Government Communications Service in cooperation with LGcommunications, an organisation that represents local council communicators.[56]

As several consecutive British governments had been criticised for officeholders' manipulative behaviour in relation to news media ('spin doctoring'), overspending on communication activities, and using public resources and personnel for party political communication (see Section 6.1), I expected that the participants at the training event would talk about these topics in a particularly controlled, defensive way, and perhaps try to distance themselves discursively from these blameworthy issues. I also presumed that as a part of their backstage training, officeholders might rehearse the application of some of the defensive semiotic equipment in preparation for the forthcoming frontstage performances. Therefore, during the observation, my perceptual lens was focused on spotting various instances of anticipative blame management, or in Goffman's (1969) terms, idealising and mystifying.

First of all, already the title of the event, Public Sector Communications Academy, may be seen as serving the purpose of idealising. The use of the term 'academy' not

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[56] I learned about the Academy by browsing the website of the Government Communication Service and sent an email to the Cabinet Office to request access to this event. The request was approved by a senior staff member and I was able to take field notes throughout the day. Notably, at the beginning of the Academy, the organisers made it clear that all participants were allowed to make social media postings from the event, thereby blurring the boundary between backstage and frontstage. Moreover, some of the materials presented at the event were afterwards made publicly available via the website of the Government Communication Service.

only implies prestige and exclusiveness – as if it was an internationally recognised higher education and research establishment – but also alludes to 'academic freedom' (i.e., self-determination of the teaching institution) and 'scientific objectivity' (i.e., acting without political agenda and seeking the 'truth'). By calling their training event 'academy', officeholders shielded their enterprise from the possible criticism by appealing to expertise, self-determination, and objectivity.

The selected expressive equipment – setting, appearance, and manner – supported the formation of this impression. The event was held at the premises of a university, not a government agency. During the presentations, the participants were seated in a large lecture hall with a pitched floor, with their attention focused on the presenter and the screen at the front of the hall. The presenters stood behind a lectern, with an exception of only two speakers (neither of whom represented the government) who chose to move around in front of the audience during their talks. All the presenters used presentation slides, often content-heavy with lots of text and figures. And all the presenters were dressed formally.

The main teaching method used throughout the day was a lecture, thus the opportunities for audience participation were limited. Despite the use of the title 'academy', there were no full-time academic scholars among the presenters: talks were given by communication practitioners and analysts, mainly representing various government departments. The presentations were relatively short: Ten people presented between the beginning of the event at 9:30 a.m. and the lunch break at 12:30 p.m., and another ten presentations were given between 1:15 and 5 p.m.

The language used by the presenters deviated from what one might typically hear at academic lectures. Several presenters uttered evaluations and imperatives that may be seen as more characteristic to self-help literature for business managers or perhaps motivational rallying speeches given at political party conventions. This included straightforward positive self-presentation of government communicators as a group, as well as the use of cryptic (and hence mystifying) managerial jargon. Here are some examples of such utterances used in the three keynote presentations:

(1)   We are doing well.

        Be proud of your day job.

        Drive for excellence.

        Get better, better, and better.

        Nobody is above tactics and below strategy.

        Drive better outcomes.

        Understand the power of your brands.

These utterances may be interpreted as repetitive confirmations of one's positive professional identity that indicate the speakers' (and participants') concern about the reputation of their profession, about the looming blame risk. The use of managerial jargon, such as 'the power of brands', suggests that the speakers conceptualise government communication as a commodity (see Section 2.3). Mystification and ingroup cohesion were also discursively realised by the use of profession-specific acronyms, such as EAST, OASIS, PROOF, and IC.[57]

Swiftness was repeatedly emphasised as an important professional value for government communicators, in both the spoken word and the movement of the presenters. For example, consider this piece of advice given by one of the keynote presenters:

(2)   Evaluate fast and learn quickly.

The most visually stunning (at least for me) performance of swiftness was given by Alex Aiken, Executive Director of Government Communications at Cabinet Office, who *ran away up the stairs* promptly after finishing his talk in front of the lecture hall.

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[57] EAST is a behaviour change framework adopted by the UK Government Communication Service. Its underlying principle is that "if you want to encourage a behaviour, make it Easy, Attractive, Social and Timely (EAST)". OASIS is a communications planning model adopted by the UK Government Communication Service. The acronym stands for Objectives, Audience/Insight, Strategy/Ideas, Implementation, and Scoring/Evaluation. PROOF is an acronym that stands for the Government Communication Service's five guiding principles for evaluating their activities: evaluation should be Pragmatic, Realistic, Objective, Open, and Fully integrated. IC stands for Internal Communications.

To better illustrate the use of multimodal resources by officeholders to keep blame at bay, I present a more detailed analysis of a key episode from the training event: the first minutes of the opening speech by Alex Aiken. Regarded as the Head of Profession of government communicators in the UK, Aiken was formally the highest ranking individual present at the event. Being the person responsible for government communication strategy and managing the combined Prime Minister's Office and Cabinet Office communications team, his keynote presentation was going to set the underlying tone of the rest of the day. Therefore I was surprised when he walked to the lectern and did not start talking to the audience. Instead, he turned his attention to the presentation computer and switched on a video that was projected on a large screen on the wall in front of the lecture hall.

The video was an animated cartoon, about two minutes long, with upbeat guitar music playing in the background throughout. The cartoon featured an anonymous male voice speaking about the government communications plan while a hand of an artist, who remained invisible, outside of the frame, swiftly drew or placed related texts and images on to a whiteboard. This technique, called 'whiteboard animation' or 'animated doodling', is often used in online video tutorials; it gives an impression of an artist recording herself in the process of her artwork.

The showing of a whiteboard animation to lead in the event served several blame management functions:

- Positive self-presentation of government communicators as a team was masked as an online tutorial. This masking relied on visual intertextuality, referring to hand-drawn video tutorial as a popular genre on social media.
- Dynamic movement of images coupled with a cheerful musical soundtrack had two effects. On the one hand, it created an elevated sense of audience engagement, thereby possibly lowering their capacity for critical reflection. On the other hand, the fluent succession of imagery evoked a sense of swiftness, an important element of the dramatic realisation of the work of government officials (Hansson, 2015b; Wodak, 2011).
- Cartoons typically present fantasy worlds, thus making it easy to background or omit real-world problems. The use of simple drawings and concrete numerical data in the cartoon made the content seemingly power-neutral. For

instance, there were no depictions of real or abstract ministers, journalists, or members of the opposition.

- Showing a video enabled the presenter to shift his footing. By 'letting a video speak' about the tasks and accomplishments of government communicators instead of him talking about these issues, Aiken was able to (a) give an impression of neutrality as the video seemingly presented the 'facts' about government communication, and (b) distance himself from the party political content of the government communications plan. In Goffman's (1981) terms, the introduction of the government communications plan through the medium of a cartoon and an anonymous voice-over speaker effectively masked the Principal (it was not clear who was responsible for the message) as well as the Author (it was not evident who created the content and form of a message). Aiken seemed to assume a smaller degree of authorship and responsibility for the message compared to if he had 'animated' the same sentences in his speech.

In what follows, I analyse the content of the cartoon in detail in terms of how multimodal resources are put into use to avoid blame. The full transcript of the cartoon – containing both the text read by the voice-over and the description of the moving images on screen – is provided in Appendix F.[58]

(3)   1   Alongside legislation, regulation and taxation,
        2   communication is one of the four key levers of government.

In (3), the anonymous speaker represents government communication metaphorically as a tool in the hands of government ('lever of government') and identifies it with other types of government action ('legislation, regulation and taxation'). This has at least three implications in terms of blame management. First, perception of individual agency is reduced as people – government communicators – are depicted as 'instruments' rather than moral actors who make their own choices. This view is emphasised in the cartoon by the use of an image of a stylised lever attached to the Houses of Parliament (see Figure 7.1). Second, the semantic field of 'government communication' is narrowed down to denote a regulatory tool so that possible alternative/critical understandings of the notion (e.g., government communication as

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[58] The Government Communication Service has also made the cartoon available on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaAG-u1IubU

Figure 7.1. "Communication is one of the four key levers of government"

malicious propaganda/spin, or as a field of practice that has important implications for democratic deliberation; see Chapter 2) are backgrounded. Third, the use of a list is salient. Legislation, regulation and taxation are fields of activity over which state possesses a monopoly and which are backed up by coercive force. By linking the field of communication (where government does not have a monopoly and which does not directly rely on coercive force; see Yeung, 2006) with these activities, the speaker attributes government communication and government communicators with more power and prestige.

The visual resources used in parallel with these utterances support these interpretations: The logo of the Government Communication Service is presented together with the list of tasks ('Legislation', 'Regulation', 'Taxation' 'Communication') and the Houses of Parliament. This could be interpreted as mystifying because the Government Communication Service actually does not have the power to legislate, regulate, or collect taxes; the Service is not based in the Houses of Parliament, and the Service does not communicate on behalf of Parliament. Parliament's role includes examining and challenging the work of the government – an opposite to the government communicators' job of explaining and justifying the policies of the government. Therefore, by associating themselves visually with Parliament, government communicators seem to distance themselves from the government.

(4)   3   And every day we help improve the lives of people in the UK and beyond,

         4   and support the effective operation of public services.

In (4), the anonymous voice uses the inclusive first-person plural personal pronoun 'we', supposedly speaking on behalf of all the government communicators. He states as an unmitigated fact that government communicators 'help improve the lives of people in the UK and beyond' and that they do it 'every day'. Notably, the sentence starts with a coordinating conjunction 'and' that links the 'helping' of people to the 'instruments' of the government (legislation, regulation, taxation, communication) listed in previous sentence. What this seems to imply is that the use of these policy instruments by the British government is universally beneficial for people everywhere. The claim is accompanied by abstract depictions of the map of the UK and the globe, suggesting that British government communicators have a global impact. While the verbal claim is made about 'the lives of people', no humans are depicted in the video: the abstract maps are used as visual metonyms that stand for people.

(5)   5   The 2014/15 Annual Plan

       6   sets out how the Government Communication Service

       7   will help deliver the coalition's policy priorities.

In (5), a document – '2014/15 Annual Plan' – is represented as an agent who 'sets out' what the government communication professionals are supposed to do: They are supposed to "help deliver the coalition's policy priorities". While in line 2 the word 'government' seemingly refers to government in general, in this sentence a link is established with a concrete government: the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government. The political parties involved are not named: The term 'coalition' is used as a synecdoche (*pars pro toto*), perhaps to maintain the impression of party political neutrality. The imagery used in the video does not refer to the coalition (Figure 7.2).

Figure 7.2. "Help deliver the coalition's policy priorities"

A set of small abstract images that look like application icons on a smartphone screen do not seem to convey any concrete meanings related to what is being said: These icons may simply serve the function of visual distraction or embellishment, or suggesting that government communicators are using smart technology.

(6)   8   In particular, we will focus on three cross-government themes:
      9   economic confidence, fairness and aspiration, and Britain in the world.

In (6), the inclusive 'we' is used again to speak on behalf of all the government communicators, asserting that their work will "focus on three cross-government themes". What these 'themes' may mean remains a presupposed, tacit knowledge. Again, a list is used both in the spoken word as well as in the visual depiction (see Figure 7.3). 'Economic confidence' is visually illustrated as an abstract line graph with an upward moving arrow, suggesting that this 'confidence' is measurable and should take the form of certain statistical figures being on the increase. 'Fairness and aspiration' are represented as scales. Scales symbolise balancing (which may be seen as one possible aspect of 'fairness'), but it is not evident how they may be linked to 'aspiration'. 'Britain in the world' is again accompanied by an image of the globe.

(7)   10   We'll deliver these and around one hundred and forty other campaigns
      11   effectively and efficiently.

In lines 10–11, the anonymous voice makes an unmitigated promise on behalf of all the government communicators to 'deliver' campaigns 'effectively and efficiently'. The promise is linked to the previous sentence by an anaphoric reference to the three 'themes' ("We'll deliver these"), thereby making it clear that the three 'themes'

Figure 7.3. "We will focus on three cross-government themes"

should be also seen as 'campaigns' among many others ("and around one hundred and forty other campaigns"). The visual presentation of the words "140 campaigns" may be interpreted as a part of an argumentative move of positive self-presentation that relies on a particular implicit conclusion rule, topos of numbers, which can be explicated here as: 'If we deliver a certain number of campaigns, we are doing a good job'. Why carrying out this particular number of campaigns is necessary or what will these campaigns exactly involve is not explained: it seems to be presumed that the audience will be impressed by the given number.[59]

(8)   12   We will use new digital channels

       13   and we'll evaluate everything we do

       14   so that the contribution good communication makes to achieving
             government objectives

       15   is absolutely clear.

The sentence in (8) connects several propositions. First, there are two promises on behalf of government communicators: to use new digital channels, and to evaluate their own work. Second, there are two claims: the work of government communicators is good ("good communication"), and they help the government achieve its objectives. These elements are used as premises to build the following argument: If government communicators use digital channels and evaluate their own work, then the 'goodness' of their work will be taken for granted ("absolutely clear").

The visual elements that accompany this sentence on the screen serve two functions. First, the logos of the web services Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr symbolise direct online communication that is not mediated by journalists and for which the users do not have to pay. Thus these may be used to support the impression of the frugality of the government, as well as its openness to modern public spheres. Second, the presented diagrams are illegible and may seem complex (see Figure 7.4). This may evoke feelings of awe among the audiences and emphasises the expertise of government communicators – thereby presumably reducing the likelihood of criticism targeted at them.

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[59] As noted in Chapter 5, the topos of numbers is an (often implicit) content-specific conclusion rule used in practical arguments as a seemingly commonsensical bridge between numerical/statistical data and a particular claim. The topos of numbers can be generally paraphrased as follows: 'If sufficient numerical evidence is given, a specific action should be performed' (see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, p. 79).

Figure 7.4. "We'll evaluate everything we do"

(9)   16   We'll also continue with our reform of the government communications
              profession
       17   to ensure that we deliver an exceptional public service
       18   delivered by skilled and talented colleagues.

In (9), the promise to "continue with our reform" presumes that the audience
possesses previous knowledge of the 'reform' and shares the view that the reform is
necessary. Notably, communication is here framed as a public service rather than a
policy instrument ("exceptional public service"). Ingroup feelings are elicited and
strengthened among government communicators by positive naming and attribution:
They are referred to as "skilled and talented colleagues".

The accompanying visuals present information that is not clearly related to what is
being said (Figure 7.5). The words 'Core', 'Associate' and 'Affiliate' that appear on
the screen are not used by the speaker. (One needs to have read the recent *Government
Communication Service Handbook* or the website of the Government Communication
Service to recognise that these labels refer to the three 'levels of membership' in the
Service). The text '#JoinUs' also presumes specialist background knowledge: It is a
social media hashtag (a metadata label most commonly associated with micro-
blogging platform Twitter) that the Government Communication Service uses to
signal that they are inviting communication professionals to join their membership
programme online.

Figure 7.5. "Skilled and talented colleagues"

(10)　19　　Last year our strict financial controls saved the public purse

　　　　20　　more than thirty six million pounds.

　　　　21　　This year we aim to save at least forty million pounds,

　　　　22　　continue the shift away from advertising to low cost and no cost campaigns,

　　　　23　　and increase the amount of collaboration between government departments.

In (10), another topos of numbers is used to suggest that government communicators deserve praise rather than blame: The presumed common understanding is that saving a certain amount of money (36 million pounds) is desirable, and saving even more is better still. Advertising is portrayed as something from which communicators should distance themselves because of its high cost. The topos of numbers is supported by visual representation: The numbers that the speaker mentions appear on the screen together with the word 'SAVED' (Figure 7.6).

The verbal reference to 'low cost and no cost campaigns' is accompanied on screen by the logos of Twitter and YouTube and a 'thumbs up' sign (see Figure 7.7). These function as visual synecdoches for social networks – the type of online media that comes free of charge to most users.

The increased collaboration between government departments is visually represented as eight signatures. This only seems to be meaningful to those viewers who have read a copy of the *Government Communications Plan 2014/15* (HM Government, 2014), because that document contains a page with the signatures of the heads of communication from 17 departments. The picture of signatures is used as a visual
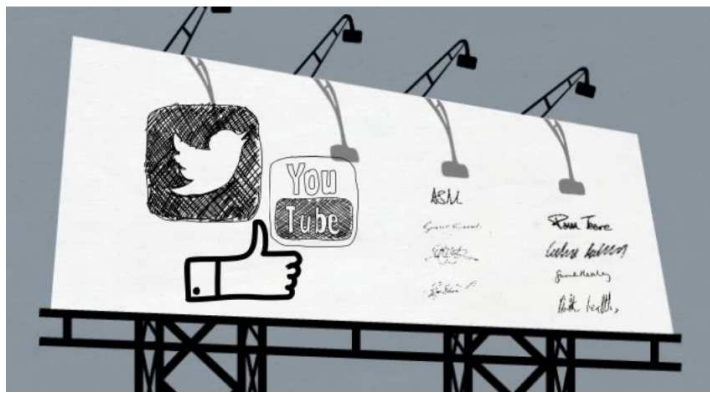
Figure 7.6. "£36 million saved"

Figure 7.7. "Collaboration between government departments"

proof of the commitment of the departments, expressed by their top communication officials, to follow this plan.

(11) 24   We expect to spend around two hundred and eighty nine million pounds
      25   on planned communications.
      26   That's the equivalent of around four pounds fifty per person per year
      27   or about the price of a coffee and a sandwich.

In (11), the topos of numbers as a warrant for positive self-presentation of government communicators is developed further. The promise to spend 'around 289 million pounds on planned communications' is not compared to the spending in previous years but apparently divided by the number of people living in the UK. The use of the 'per person per year' comparison is ambiguous and persuasive in at least three ways. First, which 'persons' the speaker is referring to is left unexplained – the audience is expected to come to the conclusion that what is meant is the whole population of the

UK. Second, this comparison implies that 'planned communications' (i.e., campaigns) by the government are beneficial for each and every person in the country: as if the government was giving a sandwich and a cup of coffee to everyone. This may be seen as misleading. There is no guarantee that every person in Britain benefits from all of the campaigns carried out by the government; indeed, many people may completely reject the aims of some of these campaigns. And third, by evoking a comparison between the government campaign spending and the price of 'a coffee and a sandwich', the authors of the video suggest that the total cost of communication campaigns is negligible: The comparison invites the audience to develop a mental model according to which 'government campaigns cost as much as a coffee and a sandwich'. This impression is supported by the visual depiction of a coffee and a sandwich (see Figure 7.8).

(12)   28   This is a sensible investment

    29   because good government communication saves lives,

    30   supports business and industry,

    31   and helps people make choices about their careers and their welfare.

In (12), government communication is represented in economic terms, as an investment, evoking the understanding of government communication as a commodity. It is attributed with a positive evaluation: 'sensible investment'. The proposition that communication campaigns are a 'sensible investment' is supported by three assertions about 'good government communication'. This way of arguing has several implications for blame management.

Figure 7.8. "The price of a coffee and a sandwich"

First, this implies that government communication is 'good' – and therefore the government communicators who do their work should not be criticised. Second, 'saving lives' is something that supposedly nobody could be blamed for. By suggesting that government communicators 'save lives', they are in effect depicted as heroes who deserve unequivocal praise. Importantly, this categorical claim backgrounds the idea that many government communicators may actually not be 'saving lives' but are rather trying to influence people's attitudes towards the government – to persuade them that the incumbent government is doing a good job. The communication activities that 'save lives' are represented visually in the form of a campaign poster for a road safety campaign that says "Driver, look out for cyclists at junctions" (see Figure 7.9).[60]

In a similar vein, while it is not clear what 'supporting business and industry' and 'helping people make choices' may involve, the use of the verbs 'support' and 'help' indicates the supposedly good will of the communicators. The construction 'helps people make choices' could be classified as what Mulderrig (2011, p. 51) calls a 'managing action': a representation that evokes "a reduced or 'softened' agency for the government and a corresponding increase in agency (and autonomy) for others."

(13)   32   We are on a journey towards world class government communications

        33   and this annual plan sets out some of the steps we'll take over the year

                ahead.

Figure 7.9. "Good government communication saves lives"

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[60] Whether preparing and distributing such posters should be equated with 'saving lives' is debatable.

In (13), the use of the JOURNEY/PATH metaphor 'we are on a journey' and 'the steps we'll take over the year ahead' evoke the unity of government communicators, implying that they will 'stick together' as a group, and that they have a common 'destination'. Such representation may function as a part of a defensive herding strategy (see Chapter 6). 'World class government communication' could be interpreted as hyperbole. 'World class' is a highly ambiguous positive attribution that cannot easily be supported by concrete comparative evidence as there are no universally accepted standards for such classifications. However, the abstract and contestable notion of 'world class government communications' is used to refer to the ultimate, taken-for-granted destination for all of the government communicators in the UK.

As soon as the cartoon ended, Aiken addressed the audience in the lecture hall and said that all government communicators in the UK should see this clip. He thus endorsed the content of the cartoon, while not explicitly identifying himself as Author or Principal. This episode, in my view, serves as a useful reminder that conductingobservations in organisational settings is necessary to make sense of the particular uses of text, talk, and images for the purpose of blame avoidance. If I had had access only to the content of the cartoon, I would have missed out on how the video was actually used during the training event to shift the presenter's footing.

7.4 Concluding remarks

I have suggested in this chapter that to understand anticipative blame avoidance in government, analysts need to pay attention to the interplay of a variety of communicative resources and strategies used by officeholders. Officeholders may try to mystify aspects of social reality that could attract blame, and idealise themselves, by combining verbal, visual, and auditory cues, exploiting the properties of a particular physical setting, and calculated shifts in footing of the speaker. In other words: Anticipative blame-avoiding behaviour can be interpreted as a sort of multimodal performance.

This means that if we take note of officeholders' text and talk *only*, we are likely to overlook certain defensive symbolic moves that they realise by other means. Researchers of government blame games may need to analyse in great detail concrete

episodes of certain performances, such as meetings, presentations, briefings, and staged photo and video opportunities. The data for such analysis may come from recordings and thorough transcriptions of not only verbal but also visual (and possibly other) communicative acts. Importantly, to interpret anticipative blame avoidance, one requires knowledge of wider context – past events and circumstances, institutions, and blame risks – that goes beyond immediate textual and visual co-text and the observable setting of the interaction. It is therefore essential to engage with several types of empirical data and theory (e.g., see Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 2009; Wodak, 2011).

By combining theoretical insights from existing literature on verbal and multimodal strategies with empirical data gathered during my fieldwork, I have tried to operationalise officeholders' anticipative blame avoidance for semiotic analysis in terms of particular multimodal ways of representing actors and actions, framing, arguing, and legitimising. I outline the defensive semiotic strategies, together with examples of their realisations taken from my analysis, in Table 7.1.

According to my observation, the use of these strategies serves two defensive functions. First, certain strategic moves help to background the ideas about any possible harm or norm violations that government communicators may have been associated with in the eyes of critical audiences, such as lying, spin doctoring, and using tax money for propaganda campaigns that may not actually serve the interests of the public. This is achieved, for example, by emphasising the positivity of their work ('good government communication saves lives'), and by using professional jargon, abstract visuals, and various numerical data to foreground the expertise and high social status of government communicators. Second, semiotic strategies are used to limit the perception of (individual) agency for behaviours and outcomes that could possibly attract blame. This involves, for example, representing government communication metaphorically as a tool in the hands of government ('lever of government'), thereby backgrounding the idea that government communicators could be moral actors who make their own choices, and by framing communication professionals as a single collectivised actor ('we'), thereby helping to diffuse potential blame that could be targeted at individual members of the ingroup.

Admittedly, my inventory of semiotic strategies of blame avoidance is not comprehensive. It is based on a small-scale qualitative research project as a first pilot study, and I am not making any claims of its generalisability. Also, my description of the wider context of the particular performance is necessarily limited. However, these limitations can be overcome in future critical research into multimodal aspects of blame avoidance in government.

Table 7.1. Semiotic strategies of blame avoidance in government

	Strategies	**Examples of realisations**
Ways of representing actors and actions	Deleting references to perpetrators, victims, losses, transgressions, and negative characteristics of perpetrators	Not using depictions of real people
	Adding cues that emphasise the positive characteristics of a problematic event or actor	Showing an image of the globe to imply that British government communicators help everyone on the planet
	Adding cues that shift the audience's attention away from a problematic event or actor	Adding upbeat background music
	Rearranging the sequence of represented events so that a negative outcome seems not to have followed from officeholders' (in)action	Presenting the savings figures before spending figures in the whiteboard animation
	Rearranging the social relations between different actors (e.g., victims and perpetrators)	Depicting government communicators as a lever attached to the Houses of Parliament
	Substituting the actual elements of a blameworthy social practice with representations that background negative meanings	Representing campaign activities as a numerical figure (a lump sum of money) with the word 'SAVED' stamped on it
	Substituting the act of doing something problematic with an act of doing something good/heroic	Associating government communication with the logos of popular social networks, and backgrounding possibly problematic government–press relations
	Choosing modality markers so to make negative events seem 'less real' and the positive events 'more real'	Showing an abstract whiteboard animation to present bullet points, numbers, graphs, and icons (thereby appealing to the abstract coding preference)

	Strategies	**Examples of realisations**
Ways of framing and positioning	Evoking the 'Rescue narrative' and claiming the role of the Hero, Helper, or Victim	Showing a road safety campaign poster that says "Driver, look out for cyclists at junctions"
	Using symbolic cues and techniques that align the performer's point of view with the audience and evoke a sense of involvement	Using the unified logo of the UK government (simplified Royal Arms) on presentation slides
	Using footing shifts to modify the perception of agency	Using an animated cartoon where an anonymous voice presents a plan
	Performing swiftness to present oneself as constantly busy and to avoid critical reflection	Running away at the end of one's presentation
	Choosing blame-neutral or blame-backgrounding physical settings for an encounter	Holding a government training event on university premises
	Using a spatial arrangement that does not facilitate dialogue	Holding a training event in a lecture theatre
Ways of arguing	Using multimodal cues as 'proof' of one's blamelessness, for casting doubt on opponent's standpoint, or shifting blame to someone or something else	Using a picture of a cup of coffee and a sandwich as 'proof' that government campaigns cost very little
Ways of legitimising	Using multimodal references to status and role for authority legitimation	Using the logo of the Government Communication Service together with a picture of the Houses of Parliament
	Using multimodal references to value systems for moral evaluation legitimation	Presenting monetary figures with the word 'SAVED' stamped on them in red letters (i.e., saving money is highly valued)
	Using multimodal references to the instrumental goals, uses and effects of institutionalised social action for rationalisation legitimation	Presenting complex diagrams to claim that scientific rationality underlies government's activities
	Using multimodal narratives for mythopoesis	Showing an animated cartoon where government communicators who save 'lives' and 'the public purse' are praised

8. Conclusions

Throughout this thesis I have referred to various heuristic 'check lists' devised by authors – from philosophers from the past, like Aristotle and Bentham, to contemporary linguists, such as van Leeuwen and Wodak – who have sought to inform and educate the public about the (mis)uses of language in public life. Those who construct such conceptual devices hope that citizens equipped with critical language awareness are better able to challenge and possibly change the socio-political circumstances in which they find themselves. In this study, I have explicitly followed – and built upon – this long tradition of language-oriented criticism of political/administrative behaviour. I have placed the discursive negotiations of power relations via legitimising and delegitimising at the centre stage of my study, and focused on government communication as one of the factors in larger societal processes that either advance or limit public participation in political debates.

By integrating knowledge and conceptual tools from several disciplines, and carrying out an exploratory qualitative study of the defensive discursive strategies used by government communicators in the UK in the aftermath of the financial crisis of the late 2000s, I have tried to unravel the complexities of defining and evaluating linguistic/symbolic forms of blame avoidance behaviour in government (RQ 1). I have proposed several frameworks for conceptualising and analysing the ways in which government communicators use language – either reactively (RQ 2) or in anticipation of blame (RQ 3) – to hold on to power. I hope that my work helps people to grasp much better the plurality of perspectives one could take when talking or writing about blame/avoidance in government, and to consider more fully the effects of particular linguistic choices on our understanding of who does or does not deserve blame.

Admittedly, the inventory of defensive discursive strategies that I have provided in this thesis is neither comprehensive nor universal, as it is based on analysing a sample of empirical data drawn from text and talk by government officeholders in one country in particular historical and institutional settings. Indeed, it seems impossible to compile a finite list of defensive linguistic resources. Blame avoidance behaviour is characterised by creativity – just like language use and other human intentional doings in general – and is hence subject to conceptual innovation. Changes in social activities and relations are often unpredictable and are therefore mainly studied in hindsight.

Social scientists cannot easily formulate universal 'laws of human behaviour' on the basis of which to make empirically ascertainable predictions (Fay, 1996). That is why it is more feasible to come up with practical (even if not 'optimal' or 'perfect') heuristic devices that help us identify, describe, and relate certain elements of human behaviour that seem conventional in particular settings.

None of the heuristics referred to or proposed in this study is intrinsically 'true' or 'false'. Their value only becomes evident when these are taken up by others – scholars, journalists, critical citizens – who recognise these as adequate for identifying and understanding certain manifestations of linguistic behaviour. All of these devices can be exploited by researchers, practitioners, and lay people in different ways. For example, Aristotle's threefold heuristic – ethos, pathos, and logos – is often presented to novice public speakers as a rule of thumb: To make one's speech more persuasive one should combine appeals to character, emotion, and reason. Bentham's outline of political fallacies has influenced the work of modern academics who develop normative argumentation theories (e.g., Grootendorst, 1997). And the discursive strategies of positive self- and negative other-presentation listed by Wodak have been taken up in a stream of interdisciplinary studies which seek to describe and explain various forms of social exclusion and populism.

I hope that the insights from my thesis will be applied in two ways. First, as this is an exploratory study, the proposed frameworks may be adopted and adapted by researchers in linguistics and political science – including, of course, myself – who carry out future case studies of defensive government communication. For example, researchers can check whether the same or somewhat similar discursive strategies are employed by officeholders in other settings. In this way, in the first instance, the frameworks could help to advance scholarly understanding of government blame games. Second, some insights about specific moves of discursive blame/avoidance could be rephrased as simplified 'rules of thumb' for critical citizens who wish to cut through the defensive communicative practices of (misbehaving) officeholders. Below, I will discuss the implications for linguists, political scientists, and critical citizens in turn.

8.1 Implications for linguists: Looking beyond linguistic features

The main thrust of my argument in this thesis has been that discourse analysts should interpret certain linguistic features in officeholders' text and talk as manifestations or indicators of blame avoidance behaviour. Below, I summarise some of the specifically linguistic features that, based on my study, seem to be characteristic of discursive blame avoidance in government:

- In terms of *social actor representation* (van Leeuwen, 1996), blame may seem distributed and somewhat less targeted when blame takers are assimilated and collectivised, for example when the proper name of an entity ('British government') or first person plural pronoun ('we') is used. Blame may seem diffused when placed on categorised collective actors ('immigrants'), functionalised actors ('government communicators'), or impersonal objectivated actors ('a report said'). Blame takers may also be completely excluded from text ('the mistakes were made'). In a similar vein, people who could be perceived as victims may be excluded or backgrounded in linguistic representations of events.

- In terms of *social action representation* (van Leeuwen, 2008), when loss-imposing actions are portrayed statically as entities or qualities (e.g., 'waste in Whitehall') then this may have an effect of masking human agency and reducing the perception of blame. A similar effect may result from deagentialising a possibly harmful action, that is, representing it as if it came about without human involvement (e.g. 'the problem occurred'). Moreover, problematic events may be represented in terms of reactions/mental processes (e.g., "I am very concerned about this"), thereby backgrounding the material causes of the event.

- Certain *metaphors* may be used by (potential) blame takers to claim a moral high ground with respect to an outgroup, and to implicate a particular outgroup as a scapegoat. For example, the metaphor POLITICS IS WAR appears in the UK government communication guidelines as a linguistic device for setting elected politicians morally further apart from permanent government communicators, making it easier to shift (potential) blame away from the latter ('if a speech by a minister included an attack… government communicators cannot join the

political battle'). Metaphoric expressions may also be used to frame (potential) blame takers as Heroes (rather than Villains), thereby trying to quench the blame making desire of various critics. For instance, when a minister states in a press release that the government "pledged to be ruthless in hunting down and eradicating waste in Whitehall" (see Chapter 4), he casts 'waste' as a Villain and the government as a Hero who 'hunts it down' and 'eradicates' it.

- *Overlexicalisation* (or discourse repetition) may be used to intensify an impression that the causes of a blameworthy event are external, and hence the particular government/officeholder does not deserve blame (e.g., the repetitive use of words like 'global', 'across the world', 'international' when talking about a crisis).

- Epistemic *modality* can be linguistically realised so that the occurrence of the blame event, or the suggestion that the event was caused by the blame taker seems less true. For example, when the UK Prime Minister writes of "the global financial turmoil that started in America" then the external cause of the turmoil is represented as an unmodalised certainty (and hence the standpoint that his government should be blamed for this seems less plausible). When the Opposition Leader, on the other hand, writes that "the current crisis may have had its trigger in the US", then 'may' functions as a modal qualifier that casts doubt on the claim of external causes of the crisis (and hence the standpoint that the government deserves blame for the crisis seems more plausible).

Whether or not an officeholder's speech act or expression is 'defensive' – that is, aimed at holding on to power – does not always become evident simply by looking at a particular textual sample. Discursive blame avoidance is a complex social phenomenon. Therefore, analysts need to make systematic attempts to combine close empirical analysis of concrete micro-level interactions between people with a thorough understanding of the situational and institutional settings as well as the broader historical and socio-political contexts of these interactions.
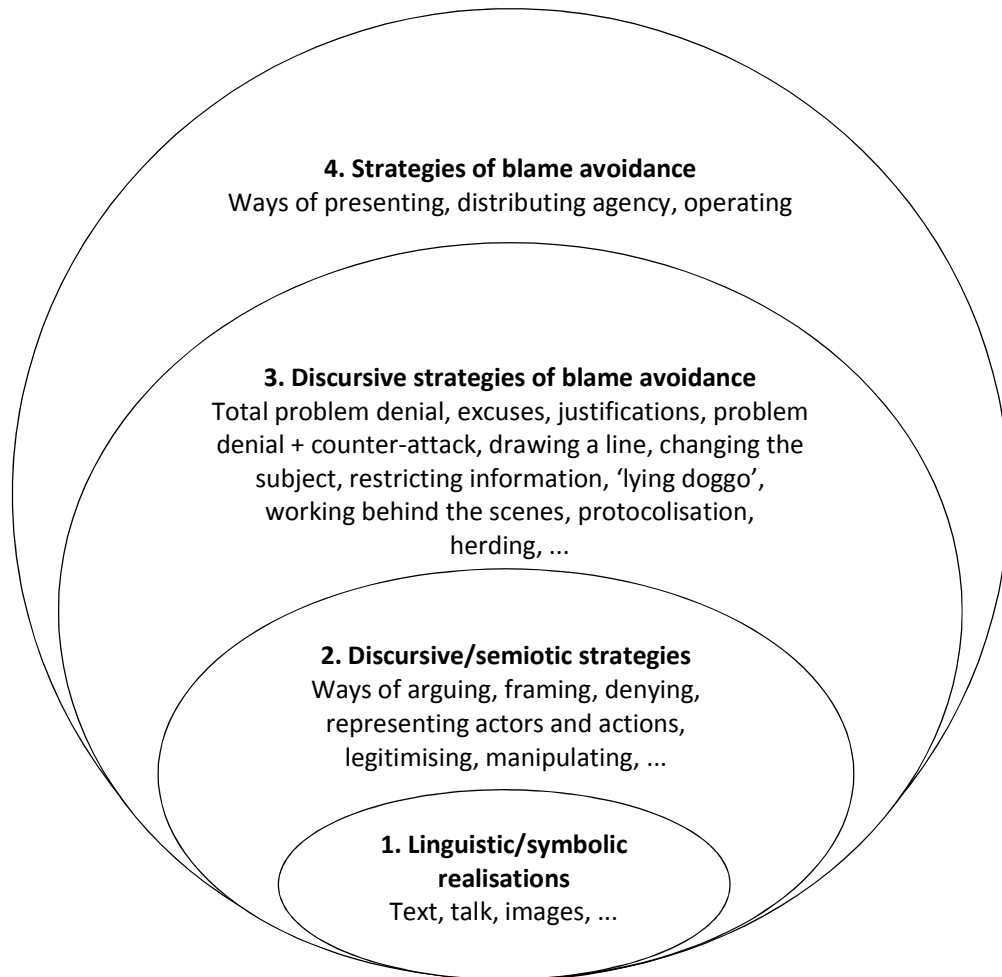
Based on this exploratory study, a conceptual framework can be drawn up that could serve as a heuristic guide for future discourse-analytical studies into blame avoidance in government communication (Figure 8.1).

6. Conceptualisations of government communication
Policy instrument
Commodity
Manipulation
Un/doing democracy

5. Components of government blame games
Blame makers
Blame takers
Events
Norms
Audiences
Contexts
Moves
Outcomes
Metadiscourses

4. Strategies of blame avoidance
Ways of presenting, distributing agency, operating

3. Discursive strategies of blame avoidance
Total problem denial, excuses, justifications, problem
denial + counter-attack, drawing a line, changing the
subject, restricting information, 'lying doggo',
working behind the scenes, protocolisation,
herding, …

2. Discursive/semiotic strategies
Ways of arguing, framing, denying,
representing actors and actions,
legitimising, manipulating, …

**1. Linguistic/symbolic
realisations**
Text, talk, images, …

**Figure 8.1. A conceptual framework for analysing blame avoidance in government
communication**

I briefly describe the main components of this framework in ascending order, from the micro-level upwards, to explain how these are related to each other and how an interpretation of a (possible) instance of blame avoidance might proceed.

1. As an initial step, empirical analysis involves collecting and studying concrete evidence of possible discursive blame avoidance in the form of *linguistic/symbolic realisations*, such as instances of text, talk, images, and other symbolic acts by government communicators. These realisations can be categorised under particular genres, such as news releases, opinion pieces, social media postings, policy documents, televised speeches, broadcast interviews, and so forth.

2. When text, talk, and images are used by officeholders in various more or less conventionalised goal-oriented ways, then these may be conceived of as *discursive or semiotic strategies*, such as strategies of arguing, framing, denying, and so forth. There are several ways in which discursive strategies might be used to affect the audience's perception of harm and causal agency in relation to (potentially) blameworthy events. These include

   - *argumentation*: using argument schemes to support the standpoint that there is little or no reason to blame anyone because little or no harm has been done, or the standpoint that harm has been done either unintentionally, unknowingly, involuntarily, or by someone else;

   - *framing*: representing oneself metaphorically/narratively as a Hero, a Helper of a Hero, or a Victim, and/or representing someone else as a Villain, to escape being assigned the role of the Villain by a blame maker;

   - *denying*: rejecting agency (via act-denial, control-denial, intention-denial) and loss (via mitigations, downtoning) in response to accusations;

   - *social actor and action representation*: exclusion, suppression, and backgrounding (e.g., by impersonalisation or nominalisation) of harmful actions, victims, and/or those actors who could possibly attract blame;

- *legitimation*: providing explanations and justifications of possibly blameworthy actions by using references to authority, moral evaluation, rationalisation, and mythopoesis; and

- *manipulation*: attempts by (potential) blame takers to impair or bias the understanding of blame-related information, and to control the formation of mental models in a way which is not in the best interest of the recipients, usually involving extensive use of discursive group polarisation, violations of conversational maxims, and other discursive strategies focused on potential vulnerabilities of recipients (e.g., their strong emotions or traumas, their lack of relevant knowledge, their lower status).

3. When certain (combinations of) discursive strategies are used defensively by (potential) blame takers in particular contexts that involve blame risk, then these may be interpreted as *discursive strategies of blame avoidance* (or presentational strategies), such as total problem denial, providing excuses and justifications, or combining problem denial with a counter-attack (see Table 4.1).

4. These strategies, in turn, are part of a broader set of *strategies of blame avoidance* which also include non-discursive behaviour, such as defensive ways of distributing agency (via institutional architecture) and defensive ways of choosing policies and operational routines (as elaborated by Hood, 2011).

5. The strategies of blame avoidance are used by government officeholders as defensive moves either in response to real blame attacks or in anticipation of potential blame attacks. Hence, the strategies of blame avoidance (including the discursive strategies and their linguistic realisations) should be interpreted as *components of a particular blame game*. Text, talk, images, and performances can be understood as strategic moves serving a defensive function if one can identify (potential) blame makers and blame takers, events that have been (or are likely to be) presented as negative, norms that are claimed (or implied) to be violated, audiences who could be persuaded to take the side of the blame makers or blame takers, and the (possible) outcomes of the blame game for the blame taker.

6. The overall meaning one attaches to a particular government blame game or a particular defensive move used by a government communicator is affected by

how one conceptualises government communication. If one takes the side of a government and conceptualises government communication as a policy instrument or a commodity, then blame avoidance seems to be a practical set of measures that should be used to achieve policy objectives of the government, or to 'manage' blame as a business risk. If one conceptualises government communication as manipulation by the political elites or as an ambiguous factor in democratic politics, then blame avoidance on the side of the government seems either to serve the maintenance of unequal power relations between the government and the victims of its manipulation, or to be an essential part of the discursive negotiations of political power in society.

To identify and interpret a (potential) instance of blame avoidance, analysts should move abductively between these analytical levels, trying to discover links between textual/symbolic data, contextual elements, and theory. While the analysis of the micro-level components 1 and 2 is primarily language-focused, the interpretation of components 3–6 essentially involves the study of the specific context of situation (e.g., formal and informal power relations between participants, institutional rules and traditions) as well as the broader socio-political and historical contexts which the defensive practices are embedded in. This can be achieved by consulting related documents, carrying out fieldwork, and drawing upon literature from multiple disciplines to gain specialised knowledge of the government at hand, the mediation of blame, and the politics of blame avoidance.

As a critical step, analysts should consider whether any of the identified defensive discursive strategies could be seen as manipulative. Admittedly, there are no universal, sure-fire procedures for identifying every instance when officeholders as blame takers use text and talk in a purely self-serving way, exploit the vulnerabilities of their audience, and hurt the interests of less advantaged groups in society. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, the (excessive) use of argumentative fallacies and group polarisation could be normatively seen as signs of discursive manipulation. For example, when a UK officeholder evokes an 'Us vs Them' opposition by juxtaposing the actions of the UK government with those of the other countries, and using negative other-presentation ("troubled Europe") to imply that the UK is not financially 'troubled', this kind of discursive triggering of group polarisation may be regarded as manipulative, if it is carried out systematically with the purpose of deflecting blame

for possible financial misconduct or policy failure of the government. In such cases, analysts should draw public attention to the manipulative effects of the particular realisation of a discursive strategy. This might result in the intensified public condemnation of the officeholder's behaviour, possibly forcing her to admit her misconduct/failure, and either to change her behaviour or resign from office.

From a linguistic point of view, anticipative discursive blame avoidance seems to be more difficult to spot and interpret than reactive blame avoidance. Reactive blame avoidance often involves sequences of interactions that unfold in relatively bounded temporal and spatial limits (e.g., a press conference or a broadcast news interview), and hence both the accusatory utterance of the blame maker and the defensive reaction of the blame taker can be relatively easily observed, recorded, and analysed. In case of anticipative blame avoidance, the 'defensiveness' of officeholders' behaviour only becomes apparent to the analyst when she becomes aware of the likelihood of various blame attacks in particular situations, and the looming outcomes of these attacks for the potential blame taker. Defensive language use can be related to concrete historical 'bad deeds', or a general critical attitude towards a particular office, profession, or individual officeholder, which seems commonsensical to a particular moral community at a certain time. For a critical linguist, this poses the need to look far beyond the immediate context of the situation, and to acquire background knowledge of past events, and socio-political and institutional variables related to the blame risk, including the (possible) effects of the mediation of the blame game. The study of anticipative discursive blame avoidance is necessarily a study of histories and the competing discourses about relations of power, perceptions of risk, norms, and norm violations.

To interpret the communicative aspects of blame/avoidance in government more thoroughly, one should ideally combine at least three kinds of specialist knowledge. By looking at the micro-political level of *discursive/semiotic strategies*, we can identify the ways in which symbolic resources like language, images, props, and so forth are used to construct certain impressions and persuade others to change their attitudes and behaviour in relation to a participant of a blame game. To understand the *mediation of blame*, we must study the ways in which people use various media to amplify, sustain, or cover up stories about blame issues, so that government-related mediated scandals emerge (or do not emerge). And by analysing the broader *political*

environment, we can find out how the behaviour of the participants in the blame game is both facilitated and constrained by various institutional, historical, and political factors (e.g., the political triggers and outcomes of a blame game).

8.2 Implications for political scientists: Dissecting the discursive micro-politics of blame/avoidance

Hood (2011) writes that "much presentational activity for blame avoidance consists of getting the words precisely right in the same way that a poet agonises over every syllable and inflection" (p. 56). Hence, it seems reasonable for scholars of government blame games to borrow insights and analytic tools from linguistics and its sub-fields – pragmatics, stylistics, and discourse studies – that traditionally specialise in micro-level interpretation of text, talk and images in use, and hypothesise on the possible effects these particular usages might have on particular audiences. Below, I summarise some of the ways in which political scientists could exploit the linguistically informed frameworks developed in this study.

- Government blame game may be conceptualised as a particular language game which involves certain typical components, such as blame makers, blame takers, events, norms, etc., which can all be cast in text, talk, and images in a variety of ways. The chosen textual or visual representation affects the way in which the situation is perceived, including the perception of who is to blame and for what. Hence researchers who read or write about a particular blame game should consider answering a number of guiding questions that might help to illuminate the linguistically constructed persuasive nature of the story. As elaborated in Chapter 3, such questions include the following: How are blame makers and blame takers named and referred to? What characteristics are attributed to them? How are the negative or positive aspects of the blame events intensified or mitigated? How are the audiences of blame games constructed and represented in text? Which contextual features are omitted, backgrounded, foregrounded, substituted, or added in stories about government-related blame? Do the speakers/writers identify themselves as participants or observers of a blame game? Not all of these components are always overtly expressed in every account of a blame game: Certain features

may be omitted or merely implied in the story, thereby indicating the stance of the speaker/writer and affecting the way the hearer/reader perceives the situation.

- Presentational strategies of blame avoidance, such as denying, justifying, and counter-attacking involve particular ways of arguing. These arguments, whether presented verbally or visually, can be sketched out based on Toulmin's functional model. This helps to focus on (a) exactly what kind of evidence is used to support the claim of blamelessness and (b) what kind of norms – supposedly shared conclusion rules (topoi) – are appealed to. Doing so makes it easier to assess the validity of the defensive arguments, and to compare these with the arguments presented by blame makers. The pragma-dialectical rules for a reasonable discussion (listed in Appendix B) could provide a normative basis for evaluating arguments used in blame games.

- Blame avoidance behaviour is often closely related to the discursive construction of social (e.g., professional, organisational, national) identities. Officeholders may use language to construct a positive (i.e., blameless, virtuous) professional identity for their ingroup (e.g., by emphasising their expertise and distancing themselves from 'bad' events and actors), presumably thereby discouraging potential blame makers from expressing their criticism. The discursive construction of professional identity may also be seen as a preemptive process of building resistance to blame. By systematically appealing to professional authority and expertise, officeholders claim the right to 'practice in peace', and the right to establish their own criteria for assessing their own work, thereby making it easier to disregard (possible) negative evaluations expressed by external critics as well as disaffected political leaders.

- Certain strategies of blame avoidance which have been categorised as operational (i.e., pertaining to the ways in which officeholders' work is organised, see Hood, 2011), such as protocolisation and herding, may also be realised by using language in particular ways (see Table 6.1). The discursive strategies used for that purpose may sometimes mislead the public. For example, discursive protocolisation could be seen as manipulative if officeholders calculatedly overemphasise the extent to which their work is rigidly regulated. Discursive herding strategy could be manipulative if

officeholders systematically omit or blur information about salient differences among the members of a professional ingroup and their actions.

- Presentational blame avoidance may be described in terms of the strategic uses of symbolic resources beyond verbal language, such as combinations of multimodal (e.g., visual and auditory) cues, physical setting, and calculated footing shifts of the speaker. Officeholders may exploit these resources to idealise certain (positive) aspects of their work, and mystify the audience by hiding certain negative aspects. Multimodal representations could be used to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, as exemplified in Chapter 7 by the use of an animated cartoon in the training of government communicators.[61] Importantly, such blurring may sometimes amount to manipulation: For example, strategic deployment of fictional (multimodal) representations can create an elevated sense of audience engagement, and background or omit real-world problems that could attract criticism.

In this study, I have tried to draw attention to the plurality of ways government communication and its defensive aspects are talked and written about. This is important, because each distinctive way of representing blame/avoidance in language constructs a particular understanding of power relations in society. Depending on one's viewpoint, dishing out blame to the government may be regarded either as deviant behaviour, a business risk, a necessary way of resisting the oppression by the ruling elites, or as an essential component of democratic political life. Accordingly, the interpretations of blame avoidance behaviour by government communicators can also differ considerably. If one conceptualises government communication primarily as a policy instrument, blame avoidance seems to be a set of measures that should be activated whenever receiving blame might hamper or block the government from achieving its policy objectives. If one conceptualises government communication as a commodity, blame avoidance appears to be a necessary craft of 'managing' blame as a business risk related to customer dissatisfaction. If government communication is taken to be essentially manipulative, blame avoidance on the side of the government seems to serve the maintenance of unequal power relations between the government

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[61] This blurring seems to fall under a broader socio-political phenomenon that has been called 'fictionalisation of politics' (see Wodak, 2011; Wodak & Forchtner, 2014).

and the victims of its manipulation: Avoiding blame means withstanding (and ignoring) the objections less powerful groups and individuals express against the oppression by the ruling elites. If one conceptualises government communication as an essential component of democratic political life that may have both positive and negative implications, then both blaming and blame avoidance have a potential to foster social learning as well as to increase democratic deficit.

An important empirical insight from the analysis of my UK government communication data set is that the government communicators in the UK, under the rule of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition from 2010–2015, conceptualised their activity mainly as a policy instrument and a commodity. The discursive features of these conceptualisations, outlined in Table 2.1, prevailed in the government communication guidelines (Chapter 6), the performances at their training event (Chapter 7), and the responses of a senior government communication official to my interview questions (Appendix E). Based on this realisation, I would like to put forward four hypotheses which could be tested by carrying out comparative research in the future.

1. It may be the case that government insiders tend to adopt, perhaps habitually, more functionalist approaches (as opposed to critical) to the work of government agencies and officeholders, because thinking and talking (too) critically about one's work could induce anxiety among government employees and reduce their desired sense of certainty. From this perspective, their conceptual choice may be interpreted as an indicator of deliberate (and perhaps organisationally supported) *lack of reflexivity* (see Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

2. It is possible that the preferred conceptualisations of government communication vary according to the *political leanings* of the government. For instance, it could be that when a government is run by a 'rightist' political leadership that fully subscribes to the doctrine known as New Public Management (see Hood, 1991), its communication is more likely to be talked of as if it was a commodity, while a 'leftist' government might perhaps pay more attention to the deliberative potential of its public communication.

3. It could be that a more instrumental approach to government communication is propelled by the perception of the *fiscal stress*: When a government makes

cuts to its budget, communication comes to be seen by government insiders as a relatively efficient instrument for achieving certain policy goals (compared to providing more financial incentives or increasing administrative capacity to enforce change).

4. By systematically representing government communication as a policy instrument or a commodity, officeholders may try to background the idea that government communication can be manipulative and hamper democratic deliberation in society. Talking and writing about government communication only in instrumental and economic terms could perhaps be interpreted as an *anticipative blame avoidance strategy*, aimed at steering public attention away from potentially conflictual or scandalous moral aspects of the work of government communicators, and towards a limited range of presumably 'positive' measurable/numerical aspects, such as concrete monetary savings related to communication campaigns.

8.3 Implications for critical citizens: Cutting through the defensive talk

Finally, I try to rephrase some insights from my study as simplified 'rules of thumb' for citizens who wish to evaluate the defensive language use of public officeholders and hold them to account. When assessing officeholders' claims of blamelessness in relation to a (potentially) harmful behaviour or outcome, it is advisable to think about the following:

- Do they try to appeal to your emotions? For example, they may try to please you (e.g., by implying that you are in some way 'better than others'), scare you (e.g., by claiming that you are under a threat), make you feel sad (e.g., by referring to traumatic events), or choose an emotionally uplifting mode for their presentation (e.g., using cheerful background music). Such appeals should be treated with suspicion, and relevant evidence/reasons should be requested to identify the instances of (possible) harm or loss and their causes.

- Do they try to appeal to their authority? They may use language and other symbolic means to indicate their high social status and expertise in a variety of ways (e.g., making powerful directive statements, referring to many laws and regulations, using professional jargon, depicting themselves as

heroes/saviours/helpers). Such appeals should be treated with suspicion, and relevant evidence/reasons should be requested to identify the instances of (possible) harm or loss and their causes.

- Do they plead ignorance? They may try to reduce the perception of blame by arguing or implying that a threat was unforeseeable and those who failed to foresee it and take precautions should not be held accountable for the resulting harm or loss. Such claims should not be taken at face value. Officeholders should be questioned to ascertain whether their reasons for having no knowledge of the possible harm are plausible or not.

- Do they deny that any harm has been done, or claim that the event or outcome in question should be seen in a positive light? In such a case, several other sources of information about the (alleged) blame event should be consulted to find out if there is any hard evidence available that would confirm that harm or loss has indeed been caused, that concrete victims can be identified and the extent of their suffering demonstrated. If this kind of evidence is available, officeholders' claims should be challenged.

- Do they avoid mentioning/discussing issues related to a (possibly) harmful behaviour or outcome? By controlling the topic, they may try to prevent others from casting doubt on their standpoints or advancing standpoints that suggest that they deserve blame. Relevant evidence/reasons should be persistently requested to identify the causes of (possible) harm or loss.

- Do they use formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous? Restatement and clarity of expression should be demanded, because otherwise one cannot assess the validity of their arguments.

8.4 Concluding remarks

It would be a mistake to treat the mediated blame games surrounding government as 'mere verbal battles', to condemn invariably all the blame makers for instigating a conflict cycle, or to regard every attempt at blame avoidance as a devious act of self-serving manipulation. Blame phenomena are complex, can be understood in multiple ways, and may involve serious clashes of incompatible interests and perspectives. Hence, discursive blame/avoidance in political life calls for sophisticated, context-sensitive analysis.

Dealing with blame is part and parcel of government communication in modern democracies. Government communication has a brighter and a darker side – it can either support or frustrate democratic deliberation in society. And so does the government blame game.

On the brighter side, both blame making and responding to blame can be a part of the process of individual and social learning, and more broadly – of personal and social change. Public manifestations of discontent potentially serve as helpful signals of (potentially) harmful (past, present, and future) events and norm violations. When government officeholders pay careful attention to the citizens' expressions of disapproval, respond directly and honestly to concrete instances of public criticism, engage in self-reflection and self-legitimation, and do this mainly via constructing sound arguments supported by relevant verifiable data, then this could improve public understanding of the inner workings of the government, the choices and trade-offs officeholders face in their work, and the underlying rationale of their decision making. A blame–response sequence can, in principle, turn out to be a valuable lesson for both officeholders and government outsiders. The former can find out more about the interests and concerns of certain individuals and groups – and embed this knowledge into future policies to improve people's lives. The latter can find out more about the intentions, obligations, and capabilities of individual officeholders and their institutions – and thereby become more knowledgeable citizens who are better equipped to hold the government to account.

On the darker side, skilful application of certain blame avoidance strategies predominantly serves the officeholders' goal of holding on to (personal) power and resisting (social) change. Officeholders may try to insulate themselves from critical audiences, avoid potentially conflictual encounters, build resilience in the face of public disapproval, and inoculate themselves against blame (e.g., by intimidating, beguiling, or bribing potential blame makers). They may behave in this way because they see public manifestations of discontent as nothing but 'ammunition' for strategic character assassination and mediated scandals orchestrated by opposition politicians whose goal is to delegitimise and replace the incumbent. Strategic blame avoidance by powerful perpetrators can take the form of suppressing victims' resistance. Defensive semiotic resources can become self-serving officeholders' instruments of resisting public resistance to untoward policies, getting away with major policy failures by

hiding and mystifying knowledge about wrongdoings, and reducing responsiveness to the concerns of less powerful individuals and groups. For such officeholders, 'learning' in the context of blame games may rather narrowly mean 'learning how to better avoid blame' – how to become more blame-proof and how to quench criticism possibly even before it is expressed.

In this thesis, I have proposed a systematic approach to identifying and interpreting defensive discursive strategies adopted by government communicators in the circumstances of blame risk, and discerning their darker forms from the brighter ones. However, my work is only a small step towards expanding the field of blame/avoidance research in terms of scope and scale, as well as interpretive and explanatory power.

The scope of this study has been limited to the UK government and a specific period: the aftermath of the financial crisis which started in 2007/2008. Future works on discursive blame avoidance may take a comparative approach and examine practices adopted by other governments in other historical and political contexts. Researchers might choose to engage with a broader range of data in terms of media, and analyse, for instance, defensive communication practices on Facebook, Twitter, and other content sharing platforms which are increasingly used by governments around the world. It is possible that the ubiquitous social networking may have an overall effect of speeding up the blame game, and compelling officeholders to adopt new kinds of defensive practices. It would be also worthwhile to seek empirical evidence of whether similar blame avoidance strategies are used in non-governmental organisational communication, that is, communication by political parties, legislatures, courts, and corporations.

Future research could focus on understanding discursive blame avoidance behaviour in government with regard to specific policy areas, such as human rights, immigration, warfare, security, privacy, and international relations. It would also be important to analyse blame avoidance in greater detail in specific arenas of blaming (e.g., conflicts over concrete policy proposals or official appointments) and to distinguish more carefully between blame events with varying magnitude or seriousness of norm violation (e.g., officeholders may get away with small personal misconduct but also with introducing a policy that affects negatively millions of people).

'Zooming in' to a single tightly defined event would make it feasible to extend the analysis temporally, that is, to describe in greater detail the related sequences of blame/avoidance interactions over several weeks, months, or even years. Analysts could take better account of the multiplicity of blame makers and describe the ways officeholders defend themselves against (potentially conflicting) blame attacks that come simultaneously from several directions. The characterisation of blame makers, blame takers, and audiences of the blame game in text and talk would merit more fine-grained analysis.[67] Yet another possibility to concentrate attention on a particular component of the blame game would be to study blame avoidance with regard to specific audiences and complement the observations of defensive behaviour with reception studies (e.g., how are defensive moves perceived by certain addressees). Last but not least, studies of blame avoidance could also be complemented with more detailed work on political and discursive strategies of blame making.

Our understandings of blame phenomena, government, and communication are not set in stone. New insights from philosophy, psychology, and sociology of blame should be incorporated into the discursive study of blame avoidance in government. Similarly, it is vital to stay in touch with the advances in academic research into public administration and policy making, media and scandal, and the pragmatics of political discourse. The more we learn about defensive behaviour in government, the more acutely aware we become of the subtleties of 'politics as usual'. We become fairer and stricter in our appraisals of what executive officeholders say or do – and what they do *not* say or do. And we become better prepared, as critical citizens, to engage in developing new, more inclusive ways of doing democracy.

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[67] For a useful overview of textual cues in characterisation of people, see Culpeper (2001).

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Appendices

## A. The discourse-historical approach (adapted from Clarke, Kwon, & Wodak, 2012)

The conceptual scaffolding: Social phenomena are seen as manifested across four levels of empirical context, and constructed/influenced by organisational actors through discursive means
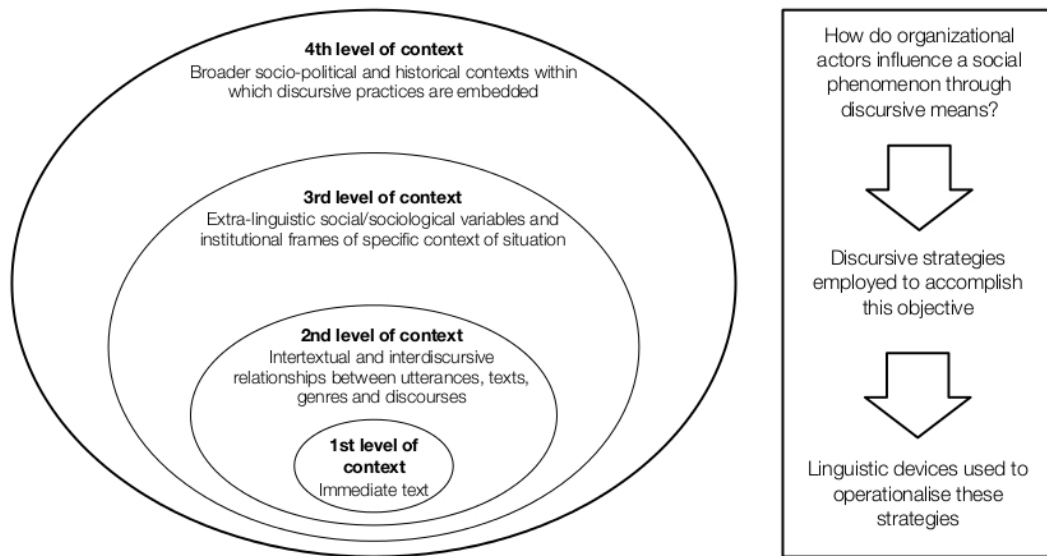
The methodological stages: A social phenomenon is investigated through an abductive but systematic dialogue between data and theory
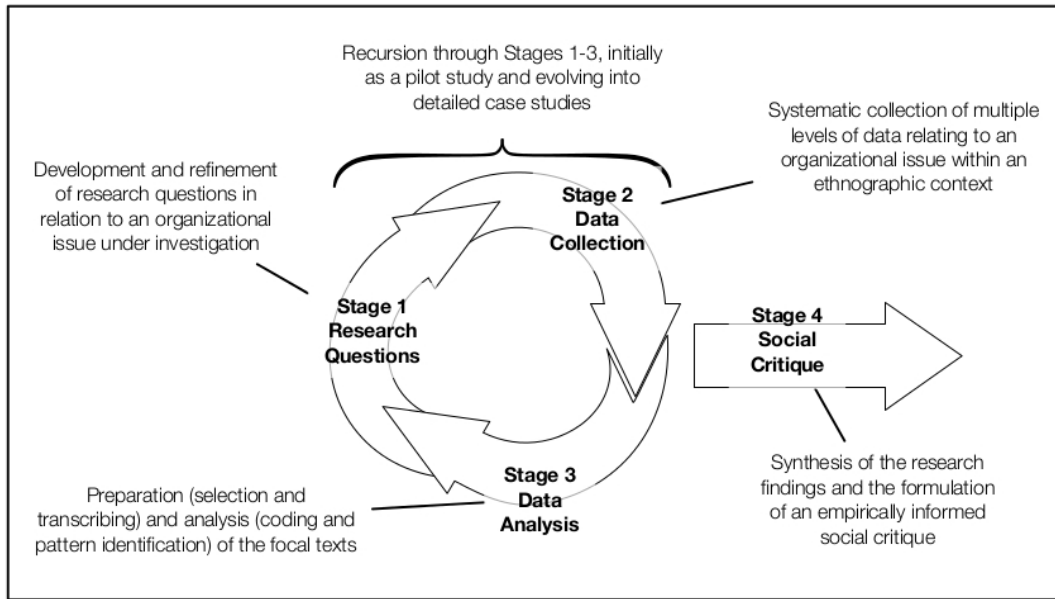
The analysis results in a *conceptual understanding* of the specific discursive/linguistic means through which the phenomenon is constructed and its implications for practitioners and researchers
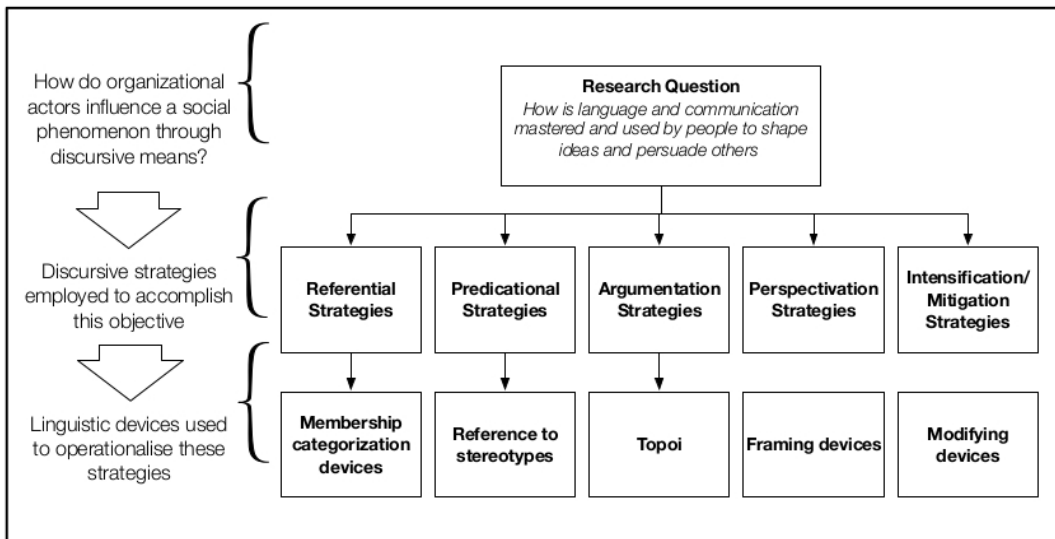
B. The pragma-dialectical rules for a reasonable discussion (adapted from van Eemeren, Grootendorst, & Snoeck Henkemans, 1996, pp. 283-284)

1. *Freedom to argue*. Parties must not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or casting doubt on standpoints.

2. *Obligation to give reasons*. A party that advances a standpoint is obliged to defend it if asked by the other party asks her to do so.

3. *Correct reference to previous discourse by the antagonist*. A party's attack on a standpoint must relate to the standpoint that has indeed been advanced by the other party.

4. *Obligation of 'matter-of-factness'*. A party may defend her standpoint only by advancing argumentation relating to that standpoint.

5. *Correct reference to implicit premises*. A party may not disown a premise that has been left implicit by that party or falsely present something as a premise that has been left unexpressed by the other party.

6. *Respect of shared starting points*. A party may not falsely present a premise as an accepted starting point nor deny a premise representing an accepted starting point.

7. *Use of plausible arguments and schemes of argumentation*. A party may not regard a standpoint as conclusively defended if the defence does not take place by means of an appropriate argumentation scheme that is correctly applied.

8. *Logical validity*. In her argumentation, a party may only use arguments that are logically valid or capable of being validated by making explicit one or more unexpressed premises.

9. *Acceptance of the discussion's results*. A failed defence of a standpoint must result in the party that put forward the standpoint retracting it, and a conclusive defence of the standpoint must result in the other party retracting his doubt about the standpoint.

10. *Clarity of expression and correct interpretation*. A party must not use formulations that are insufficiently clear or confusingly ambiguous, and must interpret the other party's formulations as carefully and accurately as possible.

C. A news release published by Cabinet Office on 11 January 2012

1   Eradicating waste in Whitehall saves £3.75 billion

2   Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude's response to the Times' article

3   'Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure'.

4   In an article entitled 'Whitehall waste: the £31 billion cost of failure' on 9 January, the

5   Times asserted that ministers need to address waste in government processes to avoid

6   billions more going down the drain.

7   Minister for the Cabinet Office Francis Maude has today made a statement in response,

8   pointing to government action designed to cut waste which has already saved £3.75

9   billion.

10   He said:

11   "When we arrived in government we pledged to be ruthless in hunting down and

12   eradicating waste in Whitehall and that is precisely what we have done. Just in the

13   first ten months to last March we saved £3.75 billion - equivalent to twice the budget

14   of the Foreign Office, or to funding 200,000 nurses.

15   This has not been easy; spending hours renegotiating contracts, tackling vested

16   interests and large suppliers and cutting back on spend on consultants and advertising

17   does not make for glamorous or headline grabbing work. For the first time, we now

18   take full advantage of the bulk-buying power government has; this means that in stark

19   contrast to the bad old days where different parts of government bought separately and

20   failed to get the best deal, we now buy together, reducing procurement spend by £1

21   billion so far and the new collective service means savings are expected to reach more

22   than £3 billion a year.

23   This work is vital. But we have a huge amount still to do. We are clamping down on

24   the loss of revenue through fraud, error and debt; and this tough new approach also

25   extends to big projects. Gone are the days when projects began with no agreed budget,

26   no business case and an unrealistic delivery timetables. The introduction of our Major

27   Projects Authority marks a sea-change in the oversight of government's major

28   projects and will achieve better value for public spending.

29 And I am not alone in highlighting all the good work we have done so far; the Public

30 Accounts Committee recently recognised and welcomed our transparent approach to

31 savings. Meanwhile other countries, especially in troubled Europe, are now looking to

32 us for how this is done.

33 We've done a lot already, but I don't plan to stop there. Our radical changes and the

34 savings we have already made are just the beginning; we are now focused on making

35 more sustainable savings, through cutting bureaucracy in the civil service and opening

36 up public services."