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When Norway met co-creation:

The import, diffusion, and onboarding of a magic concept in public administration

Jacob Torfing, Janne Paulsen Breimo, and Eva Sørensen

Transforming public governance

When public organizations search for new ways of improving public service delivery and are exposed to new governance ideas (Hendriks & Tops, 2003), the circulation of new "magic concepts" play a crucial role in prompting change. Magic concepts are characterized by a high degree of abstraction, a positive normative charge, an apparent ability to solve the previous governance problems, and, allegedly, a widespread application across different domains (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). They begin to circulate and gain foothold because they appear seductively attractive to public changemakers who want to be seen as first movers and gradually persuade others to become second movers or late adopters. The new magic concepts are often supported by a more or less elaborate public governance paradigm that expands in response to the accumulation of problems associated with the old governance paradigms (Torfing et al., 2020).

In a now classical article, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) explain why public organizations are prone to adopt new fashionable governance ideas, which may come to them in the shape of one or more magic concepts. The adoption of new fashionable governance ideas tend to enhance organizational legitimacy, which is found to be more important for the long term survival of public organizations than their ability to solve a particular set of tasks effectively (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; see also Jensen, 2003). Following the current fad and fashion for public organizations is a key source of organizational legitimacy. Hence, we tend to support organizations that are willing to reform themselves in order to do things the 'right way', even if there are performance problems. As we shall see, however, the new fad and fashion is not always fully adopted but selectively translated to the organizational context, where it is combined with last year's fashion based on a mix-and-match strategy that may give rise to tensions and conflicts.

In the wake of the aforementioned criticisms of bureaucracy and the post-bureaucratic experience with New Public Management (NPM), there has been growing scholarly interest in ideas referred to as New Public Governance (Osborne, 2006, 2010; Koppenjan & Koliba, 2013; Torfing & Triantafillou, 2013). This new governance paradigm has supported the emergence and circulation of the notion of "co-creation," which fits the definition of a magic concept as an abstract but positively charged term promising to solve key problems and enjoying wide-ranging applicability (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Hence, "co-creation" promises to make the public sector more responsive and to improve the quality and creativity of public service delivery, planning, and problem-solving by involving relevant and affected actors, including lay actors such as users, citizens, communities and civil society organizations, in distributed processes of collaboration through which problems are defined and new and bold solutions are designed and implemented (Osborne & Strokosch, 2013; Voorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2015; Brandsen et al., 2018; Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

Despite the importance ascribed by researchers to magic concepts (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011) and the theoretical advances of translation theory (Røvik, 2007, 2011), we have only scant empirical knowledge of

about how new magic concepts are imported into the public sector, how they are subsequently diffused, and how particular agencies give practical meaning to the new concepts and align them with existing practices. Hence, there are only a handful of case studies of the role of magic concepts in particular organizations and policy areas (Windholz & Hodge, 2012; Carey & Malbon, 2018; Bentzen, 2019; Flamini et al., 2019; Bragaglia, 2021). Nobody has studied how a magic concept such as co-creation can swarm an entire public sector and influence concrete governance practices. To fill this gap, this article aims to answer the pertinent research question of how co-creation has been imported into the public sector in Norway, diffused across organizations and levels, and subsequently given practical meaning and an operations-level role. Norway provides an interesting case for studying how magic concepts are adopted, diffused, and applied in the public sector since the impact of the notion of co-creation is quite significant at the rhetorical level. Searching the internet in 2014, the two Norwegian words for co-creation (*samskaping* and *samskapelse*) were mentioned on about 50 webpages, the number of hits increasing to 30,000 five years later, in 2019 (Røiseland & Lo, 2019). In 2022, the number of hits is close to 90,000. Studying the dynamics behind the rapid spread of magic concepts such as co-creation helps to shed light on public sector transformation and enables us to draw lessons about how seemingly unplanned processes may contribute to transforming how public governance is perceived and practiced.

The article begins by piecing together a theoretical framework for studying the import, diffusion, and onboarding of magic concepts in an entire public sector and then explains the methodology applied in the empirical study of the Norwegian public sector. It then presents the empirical findings and seeks to draw some lessons about the introduction, dissemination, and practical application of co-creation at different levels of governance. The discussion reflects on the possible impact of the swift introduction of co-creation, focusing on how it might clash with existing modes of governance and the need to cope with dilemmas and paradoxes. The conclusion summarizes the main argument and calls for further research on the role of magic concepts as drivers of change in public governance.

Theorizing the import, diffusion, and onboarding of magic concepts

Rational reform theories claim that organizations are constantly aiming to reform themselves to improve their efficiency and effectiveness (Hong, 2019) and that they proceed through careful problem analysis and evaluation of alternative solutions and decisions, weighing what is desirable against what is feasible for implementation and revision based on feedback (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2004). By contrast, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) find that organizations are less concerned about their own internal efficiency and effectiveness, focusing more on appearing legitimate in the eyes of their external environment. In fact, organizations may survive despite persistent failures to achieve their goals and to keep costs down as long as they follow the fad and fashion for the organizations within a particular field, thereby appearing to “be doing things right.” This institutional mechanism is particularly prevalent in organizational fields such as those in the public sector, where interorganizational competition is limited.

The magic concept theory helps to conceptualize the fad and fashion that public organizations may adopt to appear legitimate to other organizations and external stakeholders. At minimum, it points out the attractiveness of magic concepts and how they often seek to provide widely applicable responses—albeit abstract, vague, and untested—to problems associated with the existing ways of organizing and governing

organizations (Pollitt & Hupe, 2011). Hence, the adoption of new forms of governance captured by one or more magic concepts is not completely arbitrary, as it will appear to be offering an alternative to problematic forms of governance that are increasingly untenable while simultaneously claiming to provide some new, praiseworthy qualities matching existing features of public organizations. Hence, the adoption, diffusion, and onboarding of magic concepts may be conditioned by a number of push and pull factors.

To understand how organizations can boost their legitimacy by following the current fashion and importing magic concepts articulated within their organizational field, Powell and DiMaggio (1983) invoke three so-called isomorphic pressures that urge organizations to enhance their external legitimacy by doing what the organizational newcomers perceive to be fashionable, what neighboring organizations do, or what higher-up principals recommend. Put simply, public organizations change because:

- They listen to the recommendations of newly recruited staff members coming to the organization with fresh ideas and concepts that they learned in their formal education or training or in their previous employment at another workplace (“normative isomorphic pressure”).
- They imitate neighboring municipalities that they suspect are doing what is currently perceived as appropriate (“mimetic isomorphic pressure”).
- They are following the recommendations of their political principals and the central government agency that presides over the allocation of public funding (“coercive isomorphic pressure”).

The troika of isomorphic pressures maps the different sources of the fads and fashions that help to provide organizational legitimacy. In today’s globalized world, the original account of the three sources of isomorphic pressures may be modified and extended by pointing out how new employees may have been educated at foreign universities; how neighboring municipalities may be located in other countries; and that political principals may be found at the supranational level (e.g., the EU). We may also add a fourth source of isomorphic pressure in the form of international experts from think tanks, universities, and international organizations. For example, the OECD public management committee, PUMA, was officially established in 1990 and soon became an important driver for spreading new ideas associated with NPM (Barzelay, 1997; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000).

While the original argument made by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) was that organizations within a particular organizational field eventually would become almost identical because they would follow the same organizational fashion, later theories have argued that new ideas are selected and translated in different ways, thus leading to considerable variation across different organizations (Røvik, 2007, 2011). Selection refers to the process by which an organization critically reviews new governance ideas and chooses to adopt some while rejecting others; or sometimes only makes a partial adoption, depending on the compatibility with ideas and practices found in the adopting organization. Translation refers to the process through which an adopted idea is filtered through and aligned with the organizational context of the adopter. Translation theory claims that the translation of ideas and concepts from one context to another transforms their meaning. The idea or concept is being repeated as different in new contexts (Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005). As such, translation theory asserts that there is no fixed and consistent meaning of new ideas and concepts as they are translated and re-translated from context to context (Wæraas & Nielsen, 2016). Some translations of new governance ideas may acquire a local hegemony, only to be contested and re-translated to a different context where their meaning is altered (O’Mahoney, 2016).

Translation theory seems more focused on translation between contexts than between levels of governance. This benign neglect is compensated by multilevel governance theory that has analyzed policy diffusion with the European Union (EU) using the well-known ICT concepts “uploading” and “downloading” (Börzel & Panke, 2013; Prøitz, 2015). Multilevel governance theory describes a sequential process whereby EU member states shape European policies by uploading successful national policies that fit the overall European policy goals, the EU feeds back best practice policies to its member states by urging them to download a particular set of policy recommendations, and the member states in turn respond to the misfits between the EU recommendations and national-level conditions by seeking to change the EU recommendations in and through a new round of uploading. This theory can also be applied when analyzing national, multilevel governance systems where the central state, sub-national regions, and local municipalities interact in the diffusion of magic concepts and new governance paradigms.

When new ideas enter an organization, they must be onboarded by gradually being given a particular meaning, justifying their adoption with reference to a particular interpretation of push and pull factors, securing broad-based support through discussions aiming to overcome initial skepticism, integrating them into existing governance discourse, and finally testing their performativity through practical experimentation before eventually upscaling their usage. The challenging process of unpacking and anchoring innovative ideas within an existing governance context is described by adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, et al., 2009). The tension between new and old ideas often gives rise to paradoxes defined as situations where contradictory yet interrelated elements co-exist and persist over time (Smith & Lewis, 2011: 386). A new governance paradigm may appear fashionable and may enjoy widespread organization support, even if more or less incompatible with old ideas and practices. For example, co-creation may want to involve local citizens and stakeholders in policymaking hitherto seen as a prerogative of elected politicians. The paradoxes emerging in the wake of the adoption of new governance ideas call for the development and skillful use of coping strategies that either try to marginalize or suppress one side of the paradox, separate the two contradictory elements in time or space, or question, problematize, or transcend the paradox by exploiting the productivity of the tension without removing it (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Poole & van de Ven, 1989; Smith & Lewis, 2014). We shall return to the theme of paradoxes and coping strategies in the discussion that follows the empirical analysis of the import, diffusion, and onboarding of co-creation in the public sector.

Methodology

Norway is a most likely case for studying the adoption and dissemination of co-creation as a new public governance idea. Co-creation has spread rapidly throughout the public sector and is aspiring to become the new normal, at least at the rhetorical level of strategy, principles, and practical aspirations. New books on co-creation are selling well (Kobro et al., 2018; Willumsen & Ødegård, 2020), articles are receiving large numbers of reads (Torfing, Røiseland et al., 2016; Røiseland & Lo, 2019), and conferences, training programs, and workshops on co-creation are proliferating and well-attended. Moreover, as documented by the Truststate project, 29% of municipal survey respondents in Norway (n = 175) claim that co-creation is on its way into the local municipality, 33% report that it is a well-established agenda and only 12% say that it is on its way out or already gone. Co-creation seems to have come to stay.

While we would normally say that an empirical study of a most likely case selected on the dependent variable (the widespread diffusion of co-creation as a magic concept) runs the risk of producing confirmatory results, this is not a problem here, since we are not interested in testing whether magic concepts play a role in the public sector, but rather in analyzing the process that leads to this result. Indeed, we need a most likely case with a strong presence of a magic concept such as co-creation in order to account for its adoption, diffusion, and articulation. However, since we have not studied cases where co-creation plays only a minor role, we cannot say for sure whether the key factors identified in our study will be re-found elsewhere. This is a major limitation of our study that can only be overcome by additional empirical studies some times in the future.

Although the Scandinavian welfare state, with its tax-financed universalist welfare provisions based on citizenship, is sometimes described as a “Nordic Nirvana” (Lister, 2009), it is challenged by economic globalization, climate change, ethnic conflicts, changing demographics, shortage of well-educated labor, youth unemployment, and social problems relating to drug abuse, the concentration of bad health, and low life expectancy in particular social groups. In the Norwegian case, we can add the urgent problem with the lack of “soft hands” affecting most welfare services and the problem with securing economic growth outside the oil sector to provide a sustainable future financing of the public sector. In sum, while the Norwegian welfare state is both generous and high-performing on many counts, it also faces problems that call for innovative solutions.

The Norwegian system of governance and administration is also facing a series of challenges. The Norwegian public sector adopted NPM very selectively and resisted a wholesale implementation of the new ideas about the outsourcing of service production, performance management, and free service choice (Christensen et al., 2008). Consequently, the public sector is still dominated by “Old Public Administration” based on bureaucratic administration and professional rule and the many problems associated with it (see Torfing et al., 2020). Moreover, there is a high degree of centralization, many small municipalities with limited governance capacity and confined jurisdiction, and weak coordination between the local, regional, and national levels. Finally, it is becoming increasingly difficult to meet the growing demands from ever more affluent, critical, and assertive citizens. Hence, the call for change has grown from both inside and outside the governance system.

The conditions for plugging into the new discourse on co-creation are relatively fertile. Like the other Scandinavian countries, Norway has both a strong state and a large, well-organized civil society that have been connected through different forms of formal and informal collaboration (Andersen & Røiseland, 2008; Røiseland & Lo, 2019). Both national and regional corporatism and local traditions for cooperation between voluntary groups and public authorities have been strong. Together with the presence of a well-educated, anti-authoritarian population, a strong and well-functioning welfare state with a local presence, and positive experience with network governance and citizen participation since the 1990s, the collaborative tradition in Norway has fostered growing interest in co-creation, although the stronghold of the Old Public Management paradigm and a propensity for centralization may have functioned as a barrier.

On the background of the empirical prevalence of the concept and idea of co-creation in the Norwegian public sector, this study asks how it came about and what consequences it may have for the governance in and of local public service organizations. To shed light on the Norwegian import, diffusion, and onboarding of co-creation as a magic concept, we have collected a large amount of policy documents. Policy

documents are well-suited for analyzing magic concepts because they visualize how such concepts emerge, how they are applied for different purposes, and how they are translated into different contexts in ways that are broadly sanctioned as legitimate.

The selected documents stem from two central government departments—The Department of Health and Social Care (HOD) and the Department of Local Government and Modernization (KMD)—and three influential municipalities (Asker, Bodø, and Stavanger) focusing on three different policy sectors: one related to the *exercise of authority* (child welfare and protection), another related to *regulation* (climate change mitigation), and a third related to *service production* (elder care) (for a complete list of the collected documents, see Appendix A). The two government departments were selected because they play a role in the three policy areas in focus here. The municipalities were selected based on a Delphi study involving researchers and expert practitioners in shortlisting municipalities with both a strategic and practical focus on co-creation. Geographical distribution was a main criteria when choosing from the shortlist. Asker Municipality (AK) was selected from the south, Bodø Municipality (BK) from the north, and Stavanger Municipality (SK) from the mid-west of Norway. Finally, in addition to the documents collected from central and local governments, we also gathered relevant documents from Local Government Norway (KS), which is the national association of local municipalities that often acts as an intermediary between central and local government.

In each of the six organizations, we supplemented the document analysis with 15 interviews targeting informants who are considered co-creation first movers. Hence, we asked organizational actors to identify those employees who had spearheaded the introduction of co-creation (for a complete list of informants, see Appendix B). The interviews with the informants provide knowledge about when, how, and why the magic concept of co-creation came to play a role for the governance practices in the respective organizations.

The interviews were semi-structured, focusing on questions about how the informant became acquainted with co-creation, what co-creation means, why, and how the organization has focused on co-creation, the challenges arising from working with co-creation in the particular organization, and the link between co-creation and the three policy areas. Most interviews took more than an hour and were recorded for the purpose of transcription. The interviews were anonymous.

While the interviews were coded based on emerging categories in relation to the interview questions, the documents were coded based on the following questions: How is co-creation defined? What problems/issues is co-creation supposed to solve? Which societal actors are involved in co-creation (and how and why are these particular actors involved)? What is the strategic role and significance of co-creation? Which co-creation activities are pursued? And how is the organization transformed in the meeting with co-creation? We also studied the other words with which co-creation are combined and how often specific combinations appeared through a content analysis focusing on individual sentences.

Empirical findings

The empirical analysis reports the findings in three parts. The first part focuses on the import of the co-creation concept to discover where the new magic concept came from and what the push and pull factors

were. The second part examines the diffusion of the notion of co-creation within the Norwegian public sector and how the local and central government actors have up- and downloaded the new concept. The final part analyzes the different meanings attached to co-creation, the organizational barriers to its circulation and application, and the organizational strategies and activities aiming to give life to the new magic concept.

Where do the new ideas about co-creation come from?

The general finding is that the magic concept of co-creation slid sideways into the municipalities and national departments and agencies from either international research projects or Danish municipalities and researchers. As such, the mimetic isomorphic pressure appears stronger than the coercive and normative pressures.

A common observation from the interviews is that the local municipalities and national departments or agencies have all heard the same story about the development from Municipality 1.0 and 2.0 to 3.0. This story started to circulate in Norway around 2015. It can be traced back to the municipal CEO in Skanderborg Municipality in Denmark, Lisbeth Binderup, who produced a rather popular translation of the ideas of a transition from Old Public Management, via NPM, to New Public Governance, and into something that was easy to understand (for an oral presentation, see Binderup, 2017). Municipality 1.0 was the old vision of the municipality perceived as an almighty authority led by elected politicians and rule-abiding public managers and employees who tend to reduce municipal citizens to passive subjects of public rule. Municipality 2.0 was a new perception of the municipality as an efficient service provider driven by professional managers and service-minded public employees who treat citizens as customers choosing freely between services delivered by public or private service providers. Finally, Municipality 3.0 provides a new vision of the municipality as a platform for co-creation where politicians, public employees, and citizens all contribute to developing new and better solutions and developing common ownership of these solutions. Lisbeth Binderup was in Norway several times to tell about the prospective transition of the municipalities, and she also received several Norwegian delegations in Denmark.

The Norwegian association of municipalities, KS, produced a video about the transition to Municipality 3.0 that was shared via its homepage. The story about the new role for municipalities as co-creation orchestrators was retold in slightly more academic terms by Danish researchers, such as Eva Sørensen and Jacob Torfing, who travelled to Norway at several occasions and gave public presentations in local municipalities and to national government departments and agencies. In previous years, the same group of Danish researchers had presented ideas about collaborative innovation to Norwegian audiences. Among several others, the Innovation School in Lillehammer served as a vehicle for the dissemination of new ideas about collaborative innovation and co-creation to a new generation of public administrators. Inspiration from researchers is based on a professional-scientific authority, but is not coercive. It enters the municipalities sideways, so to speak, but does not constitute a mimetic pressure since there is no attempt to copy ideas and practices from other similar organizations. Finally, it is not a normative pressure, either, since the expert researchers do not become part of the organization, forming instead the professional standards and identities of public employees from the outside. In sum, experts and researchers seem to provide an isomorphic pressure in their own right.

The informant from BK recalls how it was the new concept of Municipality 3.0 that brought co-creation to Bodø. The national-level informants from KS, HOD, and KMD tell the same story. One of these informants reports of how she heard about Municipality 3.0 at a conference in Copenhagen. She remembers how, at that time, Norwegian public managers were looking for new concepts and images of how the public sector could work more closely together with civil society actors to mobilize the resources of the latter. Another informant refers more vaguely to collaboration on an international project as a source of the new ideas regarding co-creation.

There are also examples of municipalities finding inspiration in neighboring municipalities that are focusing on co-creation or developing ideas about co-creation together with neighboring municipalities. As a part of the Norwegian amalgamation reform in 2015-2020, there were growing local concerns with how to avoid increasing the municipality-citizen distance in the new, bigger municipalities. This concern accelerated local attempts to increase citizen participation in public planning, governance, and policymaking. In AK, the new discourse on co-creation was introduced because it signaled a commitment to active local citizen involvement in municipal decisions. As the informant relays: "At that time, there was a lot of emphasis on the notion of co-creation because we wanted to make clear to all citizens and municipal stakeholders that the new and larger municipality was something we should create together." The new discourse on co-creation in AK also referred to Municipality 3.0.

We have been unable to find any examples of coercive isomorphic pressures where a higher-level funding agency recommends a lower level agency to adopt co-creation; at least not in the beginning, where the national government departments had not fully discovered co-creation. However, we did find two examples of normative isomorphic pressures. The KS informant reports of how she learned about co-creation in her former job in a private design firm, while the SK informant claims that she brought co-creation into the municipality from the municipality where she was previously employed. The latter example could also be interpreted to some extent as a mimetic pressure from another municipality, or as a hybrid between normative and mimetic pressures.

The local and national governance actors justify the initial adoption of co-creation by referring to push and pull factors. The push factor that drives them away from the old way of doing things is first and foremost public resource scarcity in the face of growing citizen demands. This point becomes clear in a quote from a municipal informant: "The municipality has neither the capacity nor the resources to provide all of the services that the citizens demand." Another municipal informant puts it more succinctly: "There are strong economic pressures and many cutbacks. We're in an economic squeeze and need input and resources from the citizens." A third asserts that co-creation gained support because "the municipality was looking for a way of coping with the tight economic framework in times with big future challenges." A national level informant has a similar reflection: "It's interesting how previously, when there were economic problems, we talked about more efficiency and budget cuts, whereas now we talk about innovation and co-creation to solve the same problem." Co-creation is perceived as a cure to fiscal problems that were previously addressed by using LEAN. Other push factors featured in the documents are the need to find alternatives to the current oil-based economic growth, the growing societal complexity that calls for crosscutting collaboration, and the need to overcome the widening gulf between experts and lay actors, including citizens and civil society actors.

With regard to the pull factors, there is strong emphasis on how co-creation can help to empower citizens and enhance their democratic participation in ways that foster a common ownership of new solutions and develop a shared responsibility for public governance. One of the municipal documents indicates that co-creation is a response to the demand for more democratic participation and a way of getting closer to the citizens in times where the distance is often excessive. The citizens are portrayed as both competent and demanding, and co-creation is a way of involving them in ways that give the municipality tailwind rather than headwind.

From the point of view of the municipality, the great attraction of co-creation is summarized by the informant from KS: “The transition to Municipality 3.0 meant that the municipalities shouldn't just provide services to the citizens, but become a co-creating actor that involves the citizens as active and contributing partners so that the services become more needs-based and costs are reduced.” Hence, co-creation is the silver bullet that makes public service both better and cheaper, just like NPM had originally promised.

Uploading and downloading ideas about co-creation

According to several informants, the municipalities adopted co-creation before (and more wholeheartedly) than the central ministries, and simultaneously with Local Government Norway. As one local informant contends: “In recent years, co-creation has been a strong new trend and something to which many municipalities subscribe.” It is subsequently noted that many municipalities work with co-creation without persistently using the term, because local managers fear that it will alienate some people to use such a new and abstract term. As we have seen, the municipalities found the inspiration to adopt co-creation as governance tool straight from other Danish or Norwegian municipalities, and the story they were told focused on a new role for local municipalities (Municipality 3.0) rather than a new role for sub-national regional authorities, state departments, or other public organizations. The great proximity between municipal service organizations and local citizens in the highly decentralized Norwegian welfare state also paved the way for the municipalities to be first movers and early adopters. The municipalities were looking for new ways of developing effective policies and efficient service production, and they saw co-creation as a promising new route. The embrace of co-creation, however, seems to depend on the presence of positive past experiences with citizen involvement and prevalence of an open, post-bureaucratic leadership style focusing on public value creation.

The Norwegian association of local governments, KS, also adopted co-creation inspired by Danish experiences and research. Aside from a few early adopters, it became the primary vehicle for the diffusion of co-creation to the municipalities. Hence, in response to the needs and demands of a growing number of pioneering municipalities, KS developed a broad range of supportive tools, methods, activities, and learning networks that helped the municipalities to co-create new solutions. The new tools and methods inspired more municipalities to board the rapidly moving co-creation train and lowered their transaction costs by offering manuals and systems in support of co-creation processes. KS was also proactive in promoting co-creation as a tool for city councils to strengthen both political leadership and citizen participation through the co-creation of new policy solutions. Danish researchers were brought in to develop a training program for local city councils that wanted to co-create policies together with local citizens.

Central government departments (e.g., HOD, KMD) were slower to adopt co-creation ideas, which were primarily seen as a tool for innovation (HOD) or an afterthought in relation to more traditional forms of collaborative governance or corporatist interest mediation (KMD). When co-creation came to the fore, it was mostly considered something that the municipalities were supposed to do to mobilize societal resources in local service production and to foster ownership of public governance. This all reflects how the different government departments were not themselves involved in service delivery and governance solutions due to the high level of decentralization in the Norwegian welfare state.

In 2015, when the municipalities started adopting new ideas about co-creation, there was only sporadic mention of co-creation in two national government documents. While a 2011 green paper, *Innovation in Care Services (Innovation i omsorg)* (NOU, 2011), refers to expanded collaboration and active aging, it only mentions co-creation in passing. By contrast, a subsequent 2013 white paper, *Future Care (Morgendagens omsorg)*, contains a brief section on co-creation, defined as “a method for mobilizing resources across society that requires interaction participation and joint problem-solving” (Meld. St. 29, 2013: 51). The section on co-creation refers to a manifest from a Danish business conference on co-creation in 2009. However, this early and short-lived mention of co-creation had no real foundation in the Norwegian public sector and reads as an incidental add-on to the white paper that focused on the future of elder care and had limited policy impact.

After 2015, national government reports referred to co-creation more frequently. White papers from 2017 (elder care), from 2019 (health, innovation), and 2020 (school); instructive reports from 2017 (municipal governance), 2018 (entrepreneurship), and 2019 (schools); and, finally, planning reports from 2016 (environment) and 2021 (children and youth) all bear witness to the national government’s many recommendations regarding co-creation as a local strategy for achieving policy goals and delivering services in different sectors (Environmental Agency, 2016; Ministry of Local Government and Modernization, 2017; Interdepartmental Working Group, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2019; Meld. St. 15, 2017; Meld. St. 19, 2019; Meld. St. 30, 2019; Meld. St. 18 (2020), Handlingsplan, 2021).

In sum, the diffusion of co-creation in the Norwegian public sector followed the pattern from the European multilevel governance system: New ideas and practices were developed at the local level and then uploaded to the national level, which then fed back supportive tools and new policy initiatives based on co-creation to the municipalities, which in turn had to adopt and adapt these new initiatives to make them fit the local context of implementation.

Giving meaning to and applying co-creation in local and national organizations

The informants clearly recognize the open, imprecise, and malleable character of the notion of co-creation, the room for interpretation, and the importance of translation and re-translation. It is evident in this quote: “We all talk about co-creation as if we mean the same. But we probably don’t.” Another informant agrees: “Co-creation as a term isn’t clear ... it means dialogue, collaboration, and open-ended processes. That’s nothing new. But over the years, it has changed its meaning and now means that we must all contribute to reach common goals and solve common problems.” Later, the same informant further explains the idea of contributing to society: “Co-creation is more than citizen participation. It’s about citizens taking more responsibility. It’s more than just voicing one’s opinions—it’s about making a contribution at a higher level.”

A third informant takes this point one step further, defining co-creation as: “a collaborative process where citizens, local firms, and civic organizations develop and implement new solutions together with the municipality.” Several of the documents from the municipalities reiterate this definition slightly differently, some incorporating the idea that collaboration is on an equal footing and others demanding that the solutions are new, smart, or innovative.

Several municipal informants stress that co-creation is more than citizen participation in municipal affairs based on hearings and consultations. As one asserts:

Co-creation leads to a displacement of power away from the municipality. It requires that the municipalities surrender their expert role, open up the municipality, communicate better, engage people earlier in decision making processes, and work together on an equal footing with external actors.

In line with this, many of the analyzed documents talk about the exchange of knowledge, ideas, and other resources as a key driver for participation in co-creation.

While most of the local informants see co-creation as a commitment to collaboration with external actors, one of them points out the relation between external and internal interaction:

Co-creation is highlighting the external collaboration of the municipalities, but it's also a tool for stimulating internal collaboration around specific problems. If we are to collaborate more with external actors, we must coordinate this collaboration within the municipality.

As such, external and internal collaboration feed into each other and are thus intrinsically linked.

An informant from one of the central government departments sees co-creation as a catalyst of change:

Co-creation is a kind of bridging concept that allows us to leave old concepts and practices behind and adopt new ones. That's why so many people have taken the concept to heart. It's less normative than the traditional concept of voluntarism, which is connected to an idea of obligation.

According to this quote, co-creation allows the municipalities to rethink themselves and change their *modus operandi*. Another national level informant also links co-creation to innovation, but not in the sense of co-creation as a catalyst for organizational change; rather, co-creation is seen as a process that produces innovative solutions: “Co-creation is a new way of working together to produce an innovative solution to a societal problem or challenge. Several actors become part of the same mission.” The two different views are compatible, since co-creation sets a new agenda about involving relevant and affected actors in collaborative processes that may produce innovative solutions. Much in line with these different but compatible meanings of co-creation, we find that across all our collected documents, “co-creation” was combined most often with “involvement,” “participation,” and “innovation.”

Some of the informants have reflections about the newness of co-creation. One of them tends to stress continuity as well as discontinuity:

I guess that many will say that we have worked with co-creation for many years, because it's inherent to the Norwegian model. But I think we need to talk about co-creation as

something new in order to mark the shift in governance paradigms that we're now in the middle of.

Interesting here is how the newness of co-creation is seen as something that can be constructed and emphasized in order to bring about desired change.

No matter how the meaning of co-creation is constructed, there seem to be some frequently mentioned barriers to its circulation and practical application. At the local level, one of the problems is that the meaning of co-creation remains unclear and difficult to communicate. "People are often left with the impression that we want to give them more influence on municipal decisions without getting anything in return. That's entirely wrong and shows how we fail to communicate what co-creation is all about," says one local level informant. Another problem is that the municipal organization is hierarchical and divided into silos that hamper collaboration. Moreover, there are national laws preventing the implementation of co-created solutions at the local level, and a lot of formal demands for administrative investigation and scrutiny that may delay decisions and complicate co-creation. Municipal companies are also governed in ways that hinder co-creation. A third problem is that citizen involvement challenges professional expertise. As one informant remarks: "If you're used to sitting alone and solving problems based on professional expertise—and then suddenly you have to develop joint solutions with others, it becomes really difficult." Fourth, it is mentioned how the recruitment and motivation of relevant participants for co-creation can be challenging. Some citizens are reluctant to invest time and resources in uncertain co-creation processes. Securing an equal relation between municipal officials and citizens is also difficult, because there are often huge gaps in knowledge and power resources. Finally, one of the local informants refers to a troubling tension between the involvement of relevant and affected actors in municipal governance and the political power of the elected councilors: "There's a real dilemma between the citizen involvement in co-creation and the political decisions made by the City Council." Another explains the dilemma as follows: "It's not clear whether the politicians should be involved in the co-creation process nor whether they should come in later. And how much scope they have for changing co-created decisions."

At the national level, the main problem seems to be the absence of any tradition for working together across government agencies; each department has its own goals, tasks, and performance targets, as well as its own knowledge, budget, and employees, which are deployed to produce sector-specific legislation and regulations. Moreover, once some sort of collaborative governance eventually develops, the relations between the different agencies and actors often become so formal and tightly governed that it is hard to talk about collaboration as an open-ended and creative co-creation process. Finally, there are concerns about the lack of time and resources to initiate co-creation at the national level and problems with securing the clear anchorage of co-creation processes that appear diffuse and multidimensional.

One informant reports that it took some time before the first movers in the municipalities could talk about co-creation without having to make excuses. Gradually, however, the co-creation idea was anchored at the apex of the municipality with support from the mayors, the city councilors and the municipal CEOs. In one of the three municipalities we studied, a crosscutting management group saw the video about Municipality 3.0 together and developed joint ownership of the new ideas that amounted to joint recognition: "We can no longer sit in city hall and believe we have all the answers and can solve all the problems on our own." Subsequently, the politicians were invited to a "vision seminar" about co-creation as a new governance strategy, and there were presentations for the youth council and some public schools. Social media were

also used to spread the message. Nevertheless, as the informant admits: “We're still not good enough at involving people... We could have had gotten much better input if we had worked more systematically with co-creation.” That said, the informant concludes that co-creation has had considerable resonance in the municipality and a real and positive effect.

The municipalities mention co-creation (or derivatives thereof) in their strategic planning documents, especially in relation to the so-called “society part,” which describes the goals of the municipality and how they will be achieved. Both climate solutions and care for children and the elderly appear to be subject to co-creation. However, AK seems to use co-creation more in relation to climate problems, whereas SK uses co-creation most in relation to childcare and BK most in relation to health care for the elderly.

Co-creation sometimes leads to organizational changes such as new ways of working with citizen involvement, the appointment of a director for citizenship with a special responsibility for co-creation, the formation of cross-boundary planning groups, and the establishment of a “co-creation school” together with the local university. Several informants remark how co-creation not only requires organizational changes but also a new culture or mind-set, which it may take a decade to develop.

Lastly yet importantly, co-creation is gradually deployed at the operational project level in relation to the development of *inter alia* a new youth policy, socioeconomic transformation, the green transition, and smart city projects. One example of a local co-creation project is the collaboration in AK between the municipality and a private developer; they both owned neighboring vacant lots and initiated a collaborative innovation project aiming to create an intergenerational neighborhood (the future inhabitants of which are also invited to participate in developing the neighborhood). Documents from AK also describe co-creation processes involving citizens and politicians in task committees responsible for co-creating new policies. Another example is the use of co-creation in the attempt to move the airport and develop a new part of the city of Bodø. This is a highly ambitious project founded on principles of co-creation with local citizens. Documents from BK also include mention of the co-creation of health initiatives to promote “good living.” As a final example, SK has created a smart city cluster with 50 different actors to develop new strategies for commerce in the region. The documents also describe how co-creation is used to improve the quality of life in local communities (Bølyst).

At the national level, the actual experience with collaboration with users and stakeholders is limited and hampered by legal concerns. However, there are examples of campaigns such as “Live life to the fullest,” “Social care tomorrow,” and “Zero growth in individual transport,” which involve the mobilization of a broad spectrum of local actors, thus requiring local municipalities to engage others than their own troops. Typically, co-creation is used as part of government initiatives based on local implementation. In relation to these centrally initiated but locally implemented co-creation initiatives, one of the national-level informants expresses doubts about whether the municipalities assume full responsibility for coordinating, inspiring, and guiding the local co-creation processes in ways that ensure the realization of the potential.

Discussion: impact, clashes, dilemmas, and coping strategies

The empirical analysis reveals how the mimetic isomorphic pressure whereby organizations learn from other similar organizations dominates and that there is also evidence of scientific expertise as a source of

organizational fashion. The reference to different push and pull factors helps to justify the adoption of the new magic concept of co-creation. The analysis also indicates that co-creation first catches on at the local level. It is then uploaded to the national-level organizations, which finally feed recommendations about co-creation back to the local level, where municipalities are expected to download new campaigns and initiatives. The tandem of uploading and downloading ideas about co-creation seems to provide an effective diffusion mechanism. Finally, the analysis has demonstrated how co-creation is given different meanings, although with a recurrent emphasis on participation, involvement, and the joint creation of new and innovative solutions. While our data does not allow us to see how co-creation is translated and re-translated within municipal organizations and government departments, we have seen how local-level co-creation is anchored at the apex and integrated in policy and planning documents, gradually finding its way into concrete projects and practices. The practical application of co-creation is met by a diverse set of barriers that produce inertia, conflicts, dilemmas, and paradoxes. Here, we will examine how emerging dilemmas and paradoxes can be coped with.

Turning now from the empirical results to a broader reflection on their significance, the rapid spread of co-creation as a magic concept is likely to have a mixed and tension-ridden impact. Starting with the potentially positive impact, the attempt to transform the public sector from a bureaucratic authority and an effective service provider into a platform for co-creation seems to provide a powerful vision for public sector renewal (Ansell & Torfing, 2021). First, it can help public organizations and society more broadly to mobilize the resources needed to achieve its high ambitions to create a redistributive and sustainable socioeconomic growth (Ordanini & Pasini, 2008). Second, it can supplement and supplant the traditional parliamentary chain of government with a recursive system of interaction based on problem-focused involvement of relevant and affected actors from state, market, and civil society, which sometimes produce collective intelligence and wisdom (Landemore & Elster, 2012). Finally, it will reinvigorate democracy by providing new forms of thick participation based on the active and direct involvement of actors in governance processes taking place in complex societies in which power is distributed and shared (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015).

At a more concrete level, co-creation may help to solve some key problems in the public sector. The service problem stemming from the rising expectation to the public sector in times with scarce resources can be solved through the reshaping of the expectations of co-creating citizens combined with the mobilization of their resources in the production of public value outcomes. The policy problem derived from the pervasiveness of wicked problems can be solved through the co-creation of innovative solutions based on knowledge sharing and mutual learning. The community problem epitomized by the erosion of social capital can be solved through the co-creation of joint solutions that will tend to empower the participants, build trust between different groups of societal actors, and link them with the public sector. Finally, the democratic problem resulting from the combination of democratic disenchantment, political polarization, and the development of a resistance democracy can be solved by co-creation processes that tend to deepen participation in pragmatic problem-solving and link the governing elites with the people (Ansell & Torfing, 2021).

Co-creation also has a dark side, however, as collaboration risks leading to the co-destruction of public values due to incompetence, the neglect of important options and opportunities, and/or the risk of vigilantism occurring when overzealous citizens or stakeholders take power in their own hands and neglect legal and public safety concerns (Brandsen et al., 2018). Co-creation may also create a Mathew effect due

to the risk of a participatory self-selection bias that allows the resource-strong white, retired middle-class to dominate co-creation arenas and use them to support their own privileged way of living (Warren, 2013). Finally, co-creation may lead to the stigmatization of those citizens and stakeholders who are not contributing to the co-creation of public services or public problem-solving (McMullin & Needham, 2018).

Depending on context, the positive potential might prove to outweigh the risk of negative outcomes of co-creation, but the status of co-creation as a magic concept may lead both researchers and practitioners to overlook or downplay the dark side; hence, careful evaluation of new governance practices based on co-creation is called for.

Co-creation is on the rise in Norway, but we should not forget that the import, diffusion, and onboarding of the magic concept of co-creation occurs in a public sector in which bureaucratic governance is still predominant and incorporates elements of NPM such as the creation of single-purpose agencies, outsourcing of public services, focus on performance management, and a new professional leadership style (Christensen et al., 2008). Hence, as Table 1 below indicates, co-creation will tend to introduce ideas and practices that clash with the existing governance orthodoxy based on Old Public Administration and NPM (see Osborne, 2006, 2010; Torfing and Triantafillou, 2013; Torfing et al., 2020).

Table 1: The clash between co-creation and established forms of public governance

Dimensions	The public governance orthodoxy	The co-creation challenge
Role perceptions	<p><i>Citizens</i> are perceived as passive clients or demanding customers with a free choice between public and private service providers</p> <p><i>Public employees</i> are expected to use their professional expertise to deliver high-quality services</p> <p><i>Public managers</i> are expected to ensure rule-bound administration and enhance effectiveness and cost efficiency</p> <p><i>Elected politicians</i> exercise sovereign political leadership as they have all the power and responsibility</p>	<p><i>Citizens</i> are expected to be actively involved in co-producing their own services and co-creating other public value outcomes</p> <p><i>Public employees</i> are expected to listen to and actively involve lay actors in public service production</p> <p><i>Public managers</i> are expected to facilitate the construction of platforms and arenas to co-create public value</p> <p><i>Elected politicians</i> are expected to interact with their competent, critical, and assertive followers</p>
Public organization	Public organizations are hierarchical, there is a clear separation between steering and rowing, and the horizontal division of labor combined with the use of performance management creates impenetrable administrative silos	Co-creation aims to create cross-boundary and multi-level collaboration between relevant and affected actors from the public, private, and civic sectors
Public leadership	Leadership is hierarchical, intra-organizational, and based on a combination of transactional and transformational leadership	Leadership is horizontal, distributive, and integrative and based on trust, mutual learning, dialogue, and the regulation of self-regulation
Democratic governance	In representative democracy, the citizens play a marginal role between elections and place the responsibility for governing in the hands of the politicians	In interactive forms of democracy, the citizens and other stakeholders play an active role as participants in democratic deliberation with elected politicians

Source: the table is our own design

The clashes between old and new governance ideas are likely to give rise to dilemmas and paradoxes. Starting with the emerging *dilemmas*, public managers and employees may persistently ask themselves whether it is best to treat all citizens according to fixed bureaucratic rules or to involve citizens in the co-creation of needs-based solutions that may vary across different jurisdictions. They will face the dilemma between insisting on the evidence-based treatment of individual cases and giving users and citizens a voice and space for self-determination. Finally, they may consider whether to save costs by contracting out services or to improve service quality by engaging in time- and resource-demanding processes of collaborative innovation. As such, competing administrative logics may put managers and employees in a situation where the choice of the “right” option becomes very difficult.

The clash between co-creation and the practices associated with well-established public governance paradigms may also give rise to *paradoxes*. Hence, while co-creation is hampered by red tape, the existence of some ground rules may help to facilitate fruitful interaction and trust-based collaboration between public and private actors engaged in co-creation. While co-creation favors lay-actor input, the co-creation of innovative solutions will tend to benefit from the professional knowledge and expertise from public employees. Finally, while a strict incentive-driven performance management may hamper creative problem-solving and competition may undermine collaboration, co-creation processes require continuous evaluation to maximize impact and competition between co-creating partnerships may spur innovation.

The rise of dilemmas and paradoxes calls for the use of coping strategies spanning from proactive and productive strategies aiming to confront and deal with a dilemma or paradox to reactive and unproductive strategies that either deny their existence, regress to a pre-dilemma or -paradox phase, marginalize one side of the dilemma, or separate the conflicting logics in time or space (Cameron & Quinn, 1988; Poole & van de Ven, 1989; Lewis & Smith, 2014). Let us scrutinize the dilemma revealed by the empirical analysis concerning the role of elected politicians vis-à-vis the formation of local arenas for co-creation. The idea of co-creation is to involve relevant and affected citizens to define problems and needs and to design and implement innovative solutions. Hence, citizens participate in creating public solutions on the output side of the political system. While this may mobilize societal resources and create effective solutions, it creates a problem since the local councilors have the ultimate responsibility for policymaking and will be held to account on Election Day. If they insist on the exercise of their sovereign political power, they risk undermining the co-creation process. So how to combine the co-existing but conflicting logics of co-creation and political sovereignty? One option is to relegate co-creation to seemingly unpolitical processes of service production, thus reducing it to co-production of predefined solutions based on interaction between service producers and service users. This reactive splitting strategy will leave the political leadership of the local councilors untouched by co-creation that takes place at a safe distance from political decisions making, but it will also delimit the space for the primacy of politics. A more proactive strategy will be to explore how political leadership can be strengthened through co-creation between politicians and citizens and stakeholders, where the role of elected politicians is to issue a clear mandate for the co-creation of policy solutions, to participate in the co-creation process, and finally to discuss, amend, and endorse co-created policy outcomes. This solution to the dilemma between the expansion of co-creation and the maintenance of the sovereign political power of local councilors has been successfully tested in the Norwegian municipality of Svelvik (Sørensen & Torfing, 2019). What we can learn from this example is how the expansion of co-creation eventually leads to dilemmas and paradoxes that public leaders and managers

will be tempted to try to escape but with which they must learn to cope in proactive ways if they want to exploit the opportunities provided by co-creation.

Conclusion and future research

While the Weberian model of public bureaucracy reigned almost unchallenged for more than half a century, the last 3-4 decades have seen the proliferation of a series of new and alternative public governance paradigms (Torfing, Andersen, et al., 2020). The latest fad and fashion is co-creation, which appears to have taken the Norwegian public sector by storm. This article has drawn on theories of isomorphic pressures and translation to shed light on the adoption, diffusion, and articulation of co-creation in the Norwegian public sector. The analysis has revealed an interesting trans-border imitation of external governance ideas in Norwegian municipalities that has also been conditioned by particular push and pull factors. It has also identified an important dynamic between the local and national levels and the gradual process of giving meaning to and incorporating co-creation in local governance practices. While the onboarding of co-creation has faced several problems and barriers, the bottom line is that co-creation ideas and practices have caught on in Norwegian municipalities, which are now facing the challenge of coping with dilemmas and paradoxes arising from the clash between co-creation and the established forms of public governance.

Our analysis has updated the theories and insights about magic concepts, isomorphic pressures, and translation by showing how magic concepts are sliding sideways into the Norwegian public sector, are uploaded and downloaded, and slowly imbued with more precise meaning as they are translated into specific organizational contexts. We willingly admit that further studies based on an even richer data material will serve to produce a more fine-grained analysis of the dynamic interaction between foreign, national, and local actors and the differences in the uptake, meaning-giving, and application of co-creation in different organizations, policy areas, and public employee groups. Moreover, since we have only studied cases where co-creation has had a large impact, we do not know whether the factors conducive for the uptake is also present in other cases where co-creation has had less impact.

Future studies may benefit from adding a cross-national comparative dimension to the study of the spread and adaptation of new governance ideas. Some magic concepts may have limited purchasing power in some parts of the world. Zooming in on particular public organizations, future studies may also consider how magic concepts spread unevenly within local service institutions, perhaps depending on leadership style, past experiences etc. Finally, our discussion of the dilemmas arising from the introduction of new magic concepts and the need to cope with such dilemmas must be further developed to realize its potential. New research (Christensen, 2020) has taken up this new line of research in relation to public administration and co-creation but requires more attention in the coming years.

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Appendix A: List of collected documents

From central government, we collected and analyzed relevant green and white papers from the three different policy areas; in the three local governments we sampled planning documents that focused on co-creation; and with respect to Local Government Norway, we focused on documents that instructed local municipalities about how to use co-creation.

Documents central government:

Meld.st.29 (2012-2013) *Future Care*. Ministry of Health and Care Services.

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Appendix B: List of selected informants

We selected informants who were supposed to know about the use of co-creation within their respective organizations. They were all promised anonymity.

1. Municipal Strategic Advisor for Welfare Policy and Elderly Care
2. Municipal Manager for Welfare Policy and Elderly Care
3. Municipal Manager for Child Protection and Welfare
4. Municipal Section Leader for Strategy and Analysis
5. Municipal Head of Child Protection Services
6. Municipal Manager for Health and Care Services
7. Head of Municipal Environmental Department
8. Project Leader in Municipal Elderly Care
9. Municipal Manager of Planning and Construction
10. Municipal Consultant/Advisor for Planning and Construction
11. Municipal Project Leader
12. Planner/Advisor for Area and Transport at Ministry level
13. Secretary for Government White Paper
14. Head of Child Protection Services at Ministry level
15. Program Director in Local Government Norway (KS)