

Chapter 2

Finland

Informal interdependence and occasional clashes

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Abstract

Drawing on 21 interviews with political and media elites, this chapter argues that political executive-media relationships in Finland are characterised by a system of interdependence between politicians and journalists. Political advisors play a central role, while the civil servant media staff seek to maintain a neutral position. One distinct feature of the Finnish system is a high degree of access to political sources. Alongside this openness, there is a culture of informal interaction, as the management of pre-public information is crucial for politicians, journalists and civil servants. Relationships between journalists and political sources are generally good, with both sides describing a shift towards more professional and ethical conduct. Occasional antagonisms do arise nonetheless, with essentially each prime minister having phases of poor media relations at some point. While social media allows politicians to bypass the media, it is still far from surpassing the importance of traditional media coverage.

Keywords: Finland, government, media, communication, prime minister, journalism

Introduction

An independent report published on 15 May 2017 and written by Olli Mäenpää, a professor of administrative law from the University of Helsinki, heavily criticised the editorial staff of Yleisradio (Yle for short), the Finnish public service broadcasting company, for caving in to pressure from the prime minister (PM) after a negative story. The story, published in December 2016, had uncovered links between the relatives of prime minister Juha Sipilä (the Centre Party) and the state-supported mining firm, Terrafame. The relatives were owners in Katera Steel, which had landed a major contract from Terrafame, for which the PM had just approved a large tranche of additional funding. Sipilä, who was later exonerated of charges by the parliamentary ombudsman, responded by sending multiple long and angry emails to the journalists linked with the story.

Following Sipilä's complaints, senior Yle management prohibited further coverage of the story, and eventually the two journalists who had written the story resigned.

Niemikari, Risto; Raunio, Tapio & Moring, Tom (2019). Finland: Informal interdependence and occasional clashes in Karl Magnus Johansson & Gunnar Nygren (eds.) *Close and distant: Political executive-media relations in four countries*, pp. 29-54. Göteborg: Nordicom.

This resulted in a strong backlash, not just among journalists but also in society at large, with Yle and the editor-in-chief of Yle's division for news and current affairs, Atte Jääskeläinen, being accused of giving "special treatment" to the PM and the government. The report by Mäenpää came to a similar conclusion and emphasised that Yle must uphold its impartiality and remember the role of the media as a "watchdog" of political leaders (Yle, 2017a). After five consecutive years at the top, Reporters Without Borders cited Sipilä's behaviour as a reason why Finland was overtaken by Norway and Sweden in the World Press Freedom Index (Yle, 2017b).

Top-level politicians have tried to influence media before; this is not new in Finland.¹ However, this time the issue became particularly heated as the events occurred at a time when the financing of Yle was under consideration. Because of the heated public debate, the board of Yle, Yle's CEO and Jääskeläinen himself reached the conclusion that the prerequisites for Jääskeläinen's successful functioning in the office were no longer being met – and in May 2017, Jääskeläinen resigned (Yle, 2017c). Yle also promised to invest more resources into investigative journalism and develop measures for assessing its independence from outside influence (Yle, 2017d).

"Sipilägate", as the scandal was called, had in fact been preceded by another awkward moment in leader-media relationships. In September 2015, Yle allowed PM Sipilä to address the nation on the country's difficult economic situation in a pre-recorded speech that was broadcast after the evening news. This was the first such televised address by a Finnish PM since 1993, when Esko Aho spoke to the nation amid a deep recession, and as a consequence, the impartiality of both Yle and Jääskeläinen was questioned.

It is important to set these incidents against the proper backdrop. Relationships between journalists and politicians in Finland are for the most part friendly and constructive. In Finland, politicians, including the PM and ministers, are easily available for interviews, nowhere more so than in the café and corridors of Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature building. This reflects the overall Finnish political culture, which is often described as pragmatic and consensual, with party-political cooperation across the political spectrum and the involvement of stakeholders such as trade unions and other interest groups.

However, recent constitutional reforms have radically changed the Finnish political regime, with the PM and the government emerging from the shadow of the president (Karvonen, 2014; Karvonen, Paloheimo & Raunio, 2016). Thus, the rare but recurring clashes between leading politicians and the media can be seen as exceptional outbreaks of two tectonic plates trying to find their roles in a changing environment.²

This chapter analyses leader-media relationships in Finland, focusing specifically on ties and connections between the prime minister's office (PMO) and journalists. Our primary source is interviews that were carried out between January and May 2016. We interviewed political journalists from all major media (n=12), civil servants of the PMO (who either work primarily on communications matters or supervise such efforts as senior-level civil servants, n=5) and political advisors who have worked for recent prime ministers (n=4). In addition to these 21 in-depth

interviews, we rely on governmental documents about communication structures and strategies. Our main argument is that links between journalists and the PMO are institutionalised and function largely without problems, but journalists must strike a balance between closeness and impartiality. Inside the PMO, the role of party political advisors is highlighted. As regards the PMO, we observe a strong trend of increasingly centralised government communication; over time, the importance of this office has clearly increased.

The media and the political system of Finland

The relationships between the political sphere, the administrative sphere and the media would not be comprehensible without consideration of some of the characteristics of the Finnish political system and its history (Jussila, Hentilä & Nevakivi, 1999; Vartola, 2004) (Table 2.1). Finland, due to its common history with Sweden until 1807, has often been included in the Nordic or even Scandinavian group of countries. Research describes a “Scandinavian party system” or a “Nordic model” (Arter, 2016; Berglund & Lindström, 1978; Petersson, 1994). In this group, however, Finland has been a rather odd case (Moring, 2008). While the Swedish legal system of the late eighteenth century survived the Russian rule between 1809 and 1917, it did so without the structural and political changes that were implemented in the other Nordic states during this period.

Table 2.1 The media system and the political system in Finland

Characteristics	Finland
Political system	Unitary state with semi-presidentialism
Electoral system	Proportional representation (multimember constituencies)
Party system	Fragmented (eight parties in parliament)
Turnout (national elections)	Around 70 per cent
Government	Coalition (Centre Party, National Coalition, Blue Reform)
Media system	Dual public-private broadcasting system, private newspaper business
Public service broadcasting share of time in viewing	High (45 per cent) with two strong domestic commercial competitors (MTV, all channels, 24 per cent; Nelonen, all channels, 17 per cent)*
Newspaper reading (subscriptions per 1000 inhabitants)	High (320), in a diverse market with many local newspapers**

* Yle Annual Reports of 2016-2017.

** Nordicom, Newspapers circulation per thousand inhabitants 2000–2016, <http://www.nordicom.gu.se/en/statistics-facts/media-statistics>.

The Finnish party system is rooted in the five-party model that long characterised the Nordic countries, although with some important modifications. In Finland, the relatively moderate Conservative Party on the right (the National Coalition) has never been as big as in Sweden or Norway, and the small, Liberal Party has shrunk and disappeared. In contrast, the party with agrarian roots (the Centre) has succeeded in maintaining a strength clearly exceeding that of similar parties in other Nordic countries, whereas the Social Democratic Party has never become as dominant as in Sweden. As a matter of fact, in the Eduskunta, the centre-right parties have held the majority of seats since the early 1970s, often by a rather comfortable margin. Thus, the prospect of a government consisting of only left-wing parties has not been realistic for several decades and all cabinets formed after the 2003 elections have been led by centre-right parties.

In Finland, the Green League first entered the parliament in the 1980s, and having served several times in the government, it is one of the most successful green parties in Europe. Various populist movements have surfaced under different names; one of the more recent of these parties, the Finns Party, had a major breakthrough in the 2011 Eduskunta elections, where they became the third-biggest party. Although often compared to the biggest populist party in Sweden, the Sweden Democrats, which is distinctly far-right and has, until now, been isolated from political power, the history of Finnish populism is quite different.³ Due to the pattern of three to four large parties, Finland has often had government coalitions that have not followed the type of bloc politics that has long been prevalent in Sweden.

Until the reform of the constitution in 2000, the Finnish president had considerable powers and influence on government formation. Thus, Finland was not among those countries where election results reliably predicted government coalitions (Luebbert, 1986). The semi-presidential system (Nousiainen, 2001) also resulted in significant powers for the administrative elites, who maintained autonomy vis-à-vis the political elites. As noted by Stenius and Turunen (1995), Finland was isolated from the liberal changes that altered Sweden's political life after the death of Gustav III (1746-1792). These features shall be kept in mind when interpreting the interviews presented in this chapter.

With regard to the media system, Finland, like the other Nordic countries, can be placed within the "Democratic-Corporatist Model" (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Thus, in Finland there is a relatively influential press based on mass circulation, political parallelism in combination with journalistic professionalism, and the coexistence of liberal traditions of media freedom and strong state intervention in the media sector (the latter through the existence of public service broadcasting).

However, the Finnish media system does not fit this model perfectly. For example, press-party parallelism faded relatively early as subsidies to the party press were minute and later totally abandoned. (A distinguishing feature that emerged instead was a strong regional anchorage of the press.) The particular features of the country's political history also reflect how press and media freedoms are enacted. In the latter

part of the twentieth century, Finnish media exercised a temperate policy in relation to Finland's eastern neighbour, a behaviour that spilled over to respectfulness towards the political elite, particularly the president. According to Moring (2008: 58), at times this has led to "something of a free card with respect to critical surveillance of the political elite". The historical background is personified in particular by two dominant presidents after the Second World War, J.K. Paasikivi and U.K. Kekkonen. Although stretching far back in history, these cultural features have influenced the politics-media relationship in Finnish political life more generally.

More current research of nine European countries (Lengauer et al., 2014; Pfetsch et al., 2014) places Finnish political communication culture in a Scandinavian context, although not fully comfortably. Among the identified features is the notion (among politicians) that politics has become increasingly mediatised (cf. Kunelius & Reunanen, 2012; Isotalus & Almonkari, 2014), and scores high on journalistic autonomy. However, and interestingly in light of the findings in this chapter, tensions between politicians and journalists are more pronounced in Finland than in its Scandinavian neighbours, particularly regarding the belief by politicians that the media has a decisive influence on their careers. This finding may be partly explained by the political tensions around party financing that occurred shortly before the interviews were conducted (see note 6). On the other hand, in Finland, political media staff consistently took a midway position between journalists and politicians when interviewed on issues that were dividing the two, a division that was particularly pronounced in terms of the motives of each respective group. Where politicians score high on claims of biased reporting, increasingly negative reporting and "entertainmentalisation", journalists score much lower, and the political media staff fall in between. This indicates that political media staff have a certain understanding of the professional goals of journalists, most likely because they also often have a background in media.

Recent developments in the media sector have been harsh for commercial media, particularly since the economic recession starting in 2008. Commercial media has had to handle falling revenues from advertising and increased competition from digital media and search engines. Moreover, a growing share of young people has resorted to social media. The Reuters Digital News Report 2016 gives the following picture of the development in 26 countries, where Finland is included:

Across our 26 countries, we see a common picture of job losses, cost-cutting, and missed targets as falling print revenues combine with the brutal economics of digital (*sic*) in a perfect storm. Almost everywhere, we see the further adoption of online platforms and devices for news – largely as a supplement to broadcast but often at the expense of print. (Reuters Institute, 2016)

Newspapers have thus merged, and political journalism has been stripped of resources as several newspapers today share one reporting unit in the capital. Newspapers (as will be exemplified below) have also resorted to agendas that are more popular. To some extent, the heated debate around Yle can be understood from

this perspective. Together with the biggest newspapers (Helsingin Sanomat and Aamulehti), Yle has taken a leading role in digital news reporting. This has caused tensions regarding how far the publicly financed company should be allowed to expand into the digital sphere.

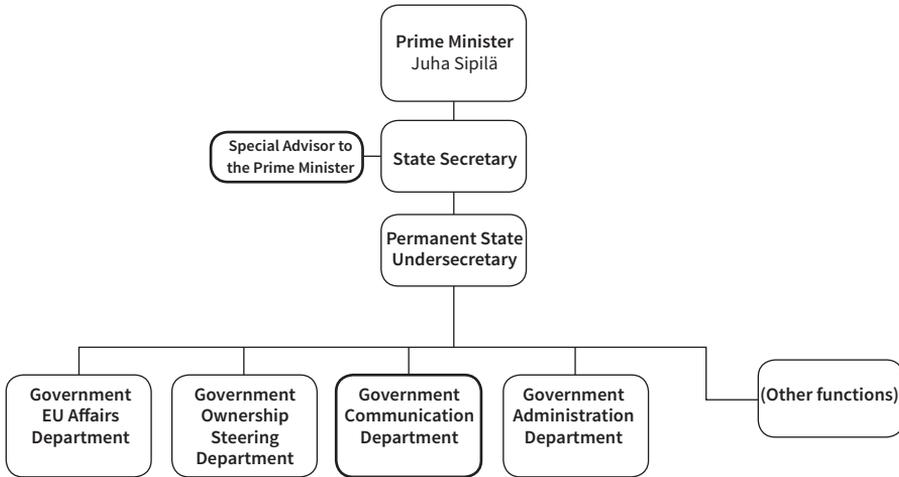
As part of this development, through blogs and social media, particularly Twitter, politicians have found new ways to spread political messages and information. Journalists are now frequently reporting the blog posts or tweets of politicians, a phenomenon that emerged long before the tweet storms of the current U.S. president. Thus, in matters where they wish to keep the publicity in their own hands, politicians have occasionally chosen to post their comments on blogs instead of giving interviews.

Organising government communication

As a result of the constitutional changes enacted since the late 1980s, the Finnish government has emerged from the shadow of the president as the main executive. The PM is the political leader of the country, and how the government and the prime minister handle their communications is therefore more important than under the old constitution. In Finland, there is a distinction between political communication and civil servant communication. The former refers to the immediate political staff of the PM and ministers (i.e. the political assistants and political advisors that are often referred to as “special advisors”; see Figure 2.1) whereas the latter refers to the civil servant communications staff of the PMO, called the “government communications department” (GCD), and other ministries’ communications departments.

Interestingly, all civil servants in charge of government communication (currently the head of GCD) have previously worked as journalists. Whereas political advisors come and go with each minister/government, the civil servants are bureaucrats who often spend their entire professional careers in the same ministry. While the number of party-political ministerial assistants has increased considerably, it is still rare for a minister to have an assistant that only deals with press matters. Instead, the assistants have a broad range of duties, including advising. In this chapter, these actors are referred to as “political advisors”.

Understanding the distinction outlined above is crucial for evaluating the data we have collected. There is no such thing as a single body of “staff for media-related matters”. Instead, there is a division between two staffs that exist simultaneously. These two groups have very different roles, responsibilities and powers, as our chapter will show. Figure 2.1 shows the PMO’s official organisational chart and highlights the distinction between political and civil servant media staff.

Figure 2.1 The official organisation chart of the PMO in Finland

Comments: Adapted from the official chart (prime minister's office, 2016a), which is dated 15 March 2016, reflecting the situation during the time our interviews were conducted. Along with the PM, the official organisation chart also mentions two other ministers as affiliated with the PMO. We have omitted these for the sake of clarity.

Daily work: “Rubbing elbows” in the Eduskunta café

When talking about daily routines, a typical answer from each of the three interviewed groups was along the lines of “there is no such thing as a regular day”. The political journalists typically begin their day with a visit to the newsroom before moving to the “field”; they spend a great deal of time in the parliament building. The GCD deals with a lot of the practical work, including updating the web pages and social media channels of the government, publishing press releases and arranging press conferences. It is responsible for the official communications of the government, routinely communicating new decisions, an area they call “communications on decisions”, and publishing current affairs communications (i.e. “news”). Senior-level civil servants have a great variety of duties and deal less with daily front-line communications.

The political advisors did not describe their daily work in much detail. They accompany and assist their ministers in most activities. As few ministers have a separate assistant just for media-related matters, their closest political advisor usually functions as press assistant. However, political advisors usually do not give statements to the media; instead, their function is to handle interview requests and relay the minister’s preliminary comments. A good depiction of the political advisors’ role is that they are “always a few metres away from the minister”.

A Finnish phenomenon is the Parliament café, which I know does not occur elsewhere. It is quite unbelievable, but journalists and ministers sit there and, you know,

have a good time sipping coffee with each other. And there is not a big gap between them, either. The gap is surprisingly small. (Finnish journalist 7)

Above is one journalist's description of a very central aspect of the Finnish system: the sense of low hierarchy between politicians and journalists. Respondents from all three groups talked about a culture of "rubbing elbows", which refers to the practices and culture in the Eduskunta, where journalists are allowed to move very freely and discuss things with anyone they come across in the hallways, including ministers, MPs and other top politicians (cf. Vesa et al., 2015). For the political side, this translates into a need for awareness: "You have to react to situations as they arise, because when the PM is in the parliament building, it is not possible to avoid commenting on current events," one of our interviewees said (Finnish political advisor 4). Generally, all three groups felt that the relations between journalists and political sources are characterised by good access.

There is also a wide range of governmental communication channels for journalists to follow. However, the journalists emphasised that limiting oneself to following these would leave them in a reactive position: "The GCD's communications are more about providing information about what has already been decided [...]. You would not have many stories if you relied solely on them" (Finnish journalist 3). This points towards the topic of informality, which will be discussed later. Another channel of communication mentioned by respondents in all three groups was the so-called "background briefings", where a select group of journalists is invited to discuss current matters in informal settings. This will also be elaborated further later in the chapter.

When asked about the frequency of their contacts with the PM, all journalists claimed to have been in contact with him or his staff very recently. The journalists and political advisors are in contact with each other daily, and so are the journalists and GCD civil servants who work mainly with communications.

Note that the important gatekeeping role of the political advisors clearly affects the journalists' work, as they invariably say that a minister's closest advisor is the most effective way of getting in touch. Naturally, the heatedness of a given political situation can lead to politicians trying to evade journalists: "There is a tendency that when the going gets tough, the phones are turned off" (Finnish journalist 10). However, in most cases, journalists feel that they can get at least some kind of a comment during the day.

With the exception of events abroad and unexpected domestic scandals, it is mostly the government that sets the political agenda, but the journalists seek to proactively find stories, and informal contacts with sources from within the government can provide them with ideas. While all three groups described social media as a way for the political side to bypass traditional media, only a few of the journalists considered social media to be a source for news as such. Instead, many journalists described it as an indicator of public opinion.

Quite understandably, the civil servants sought to refrain from having a personal presence in social media. In official communications, the government seeks to use

social media for disseminating press releases and other media content, like pictures. Note that there was a clear consensus among our interviewees: all maintained that Twitter is the single most important social media channel in politics-media relationships.

Inevitably informal? Trust-based contacts in the relationships

All three groups were asked if there is informal interaction or contact between journalists and sources on the political side (politicians, their staff or civil servants). By informal contact we mean contact that takes place outside the official sphere of daily work; people you know and can meet in your free time – even friends. The answers from all three groups made it abundantly clear that such informal interaction is very common, even natural.

With only a few exceptions, the journalists said that they have informal contacts and that they think their colleagues have as well. Such contacts are most common with politicians and their advisors. As one journalist put it: “I would say that every political journalist has these contacts; I really do not believe that someone would not have them. You cannot do this job without contacts” (Finnish journalist 11).

The civil servants also said that it is common for politicians, their advisors and civil servants to know some journalists personally, and the political advisors were of the same view. Indeed, they all claimed to have informal contacts among journalists and believed that other political advisors are no different. This is in line with the earlier interview findings of Juntunen (2011), who notes that political journalism is distinct in its use of personal contacts and informal interaction.

In informality, the aspects of inevitability and utility combine. The journalists need them in order to move away from the reactive stance discussed earlier. For the political advisors, the motivation for informality is, of course, to influence which stories unfold and from what point of view. The political advisors spoke carefully about the topic: “It is easier to cooperate and think about a story [...] together with people that you interact with more” (Finnish political advisor 4). Here, their methods range from classical leaks to calling a journalist or going out for a drink to provide their own account of a developing topic. For the civil servants, the motivation for informality was more difficult to analyse as they are more strictly bound by law not to disclose unofficial information. However, civil servants are not immune to this phenomenon. Leaks and unofficial conversations seem to extend to the civil servants as well.⁴ Out of all the interviewees, the journalists were most open about their usage of informality.

Note that all three groups of interviewees agreed that, in a small country like Finland, informal contacts are inevitable. Many commented that they have studied at the same university or happen to live in the same neighbourhood. The journalists and the civil servants, who in many cases may have worked in the same position for

decades, often mentioned that “getting to know” people comes naturally. However, this view can also be an excuse for some to justify their own personal relations, as these relations are a potential ethical challenge, at least for civil servants and journalists.

Formal methods only get you formal information. Informal methods can get you informal information. That is the deal here. And then you enter a sphere where there has to be some kind of trust on how this information will be handled. (Finnish journalist 10)

This brings in considerations for all parties involved, in terms of both ethics and utility. The journalists pondered whether they can maintain their journalistic integrity, while the political advisors, who are not bound to such an extent by ethical considerations, must maintain a balance between the positive and negative outcomes of informal contacts. The civil servants, in turn, had outright legal considerations to make: “[I]f information has been given beforehand based on informal relationships, sure, it can breed all kinds of ... situations” (Finnish civil servant 5). However, the importance of informal interaction was recognised.

Consider the following passage from a 2011 internal “handbook” of the PMO’s communications (Prime minister’s office, 2011 – The document was provided for research use by the GCD), which seeks to establish a balance between ethics and utility:

Equal treatment of media is the policy of the PMO, meaning that interesting news and other important information are available for all media equally. This is done, for instance, with public press releases and press conferences open for all newsrooms. However, the policy of impartiality does not prevent the possibility of offering a single newsroom or a group tips for stories, interviews or a prepared specialist article. Offering a newsroom a point of view on a topic that they are particularly interested in usually catches their attention and advances the PMO’s agenda more efficiently than a public announcement would. Building a personal network of relationships makes it easier for a journalist to contact you in particular, and also enables you to present the PMO’s point of view.

The experienced journalists often described two schools of thought among journalists on the topic of informal interactions with political sources. A more recent philosophy is observing journalism, where, ideally speaking, no informal interaction should be allowed and keeping a distance is considered a virtue.⁵ This is in stark contrast to the older school of “liver cirrhosis” types (a humoristic but common term), where informal interaction with political sources is a professional must for political journalists. The civil servants felt that a moderate amount of informality is a good thing, as knowing people and their ways can make work easier for everyone. Overall, they feel that it is good that people are able to interact with the media in a cooperative fashion – there is no problem, when people “know their limits”. With the political advisors, there seemed to be a tendency to use language that plays down the illegitimate aspects of informality. As one political advisor put it, informality can at best be a “win-win situ-

ation, where both sides benefit [...], especially when the rules of the game are clear for everyone” (Finnish political advisor 3).

Compare this last account with a description by a journalist: “Politics is a kind of game, where different sources and agents leak information in a way that suits them” (Finnish journalist 8). Indeed, our data suggest that the actors involved in the relationships have a game-theoretical understanding of the uses of informal interaction. Many interviewees mentioned the mutual aspect of informal interaction, where the logic of cooperation is based on long-term benefits for both sides. Cashing in on a single situation will lead to the actor in question being unable to benefit from informality later. As one senior civil servant expressed it: “We might make a deal that they do not write about it unless we agree on it. Only once has a journalist fooled me in this. But then again, once they lose your trust, then it is not good” (Finnish civil servant 1). One of the interviewed journalists described it very similarly: “It is founded over time on this kind of understanding of who you can trust, who really knows something. And if someone bullshits you even once, then it is over” (Finnish journalist 12). Interestingly enough, the interview data repeatedly show interviewees describing the possible upsides and downsides of informality with phrases like “back-scratching” and even “symbiosis”.

Our previous section on daily work mentioned that there are many channels that journalists can use to follow the government, ranging from traditional press releases and conferences to the government’s website and Twitter account. However, we found it interesting that interviewees from all three groups mentioned a distinct form of communication that was not mentioned in our interview questions: so-called “background briefings”. These are occasions when a predefined group of journalists is invited to hear information about current topics under informal names such as “morning coffee with the minister”. For example, Vesa (2015: 138) mentions an invitation to journalists from the minister of social affairs and health to attend an “evening party” where there would be a “possibility of talking about the progress of the social security reform and its financing over good food and a sauna”. The guest list often includes journalists with a particular specialist background, media affiliation or seniority status. This is in line with the description of background briefings in the current official “Central Government Communications Guidelines” (Prime minister’s office, 2016b).

These briefings are important, as they seem to fall between the official and unofficial as well as between the formal and informal. Our interviews indicate that they are arranged not only by parties and politicians (both opposition and government), but by the civil servant organisation as well. These background briefings are generally viewed as useful for both journalists and sources. Journalists can gain valuable insight, as these off-the-record situations allow for a more relaxed discussion on topics. This is in contrast to findings by Juntunen (2011), where an interviewed political journalist expressed concern about the journalists’ ability to critically assess the information provided, given the tight schedules and lack of resources that journalists face today. Indeed, the politicians and the civil servants in our data seem to deem these briefings as being useful for “deepening the journalists’ understanding” of things (Finnish civil servant 3).

The risk that a journalist would break the confidentiality exists, but rarely materialises. On the other hand, the journalists are put in a difficult position if something important is brought up in a background briefing but not followed up in an on-the-record context. Our interviewees did not articulate any outright criticism of these briefings, but the problem of drawing the line between those invited and those not invited causes occasional friction. This also pertains to the different ethical schools of thought concerning informal interaction. The utility of background briefings follows the same logic as informal interaction in general; one journalist put it like this:

The fewer people there are present, the better the “efficiency ratio” gets [...]. If you start to have, like, 20 to 30 people, then it is only useful as background information but not as material for news. [...] Those who are not invited – they are the ones who criticise [background briefings]. (Finnish journalist 7)

Note, however, that the current government communications guideline (Prime minister’s office, 2016b) has been updated to account for some of the criticism:

All media representatives must be treated equally when press conferences and briefings are held. If attendance is restricted, the grounds for exclusion must be clear-cut and fair. Public authorities need to ensure that sufficient information on the theme is also available for those who are not invited. Meetings between public authorities and individual media companies and journalists are part of the normal management of stakeholder relations.

Professionalisation: Centralisation and the divide between political staff and civil servants

When speaking of the roles of different actors in leader-media relationships, interviewees from all three groups were quick to point out the distinction between political communication and civil servant communication, as described earlier in this chapter. From a civil servant’s point of view:

Consider that we [in Finland] have political communication and civil servant communication. Even though we [at the GCD] communicate about politics all the time, it should be kept in mind that it is a different thing [...]. We only tell what we have already communicated. We do not comment on the substance or whether something is good or bad and what effects it might have. (Finnish civil servant 4)

Note, however, that the distinction between “political” and “civil servant” communication is not clear-cut. This is why the distinction also attracts some criticism from journalists. A 2016 working group appointed by the PMO to assess communications proposed “a model in which both political and public servant communications would be coordinated by communications directors in the individual ministries insofar as the communications relate to the implementation of the government programme”

(Prime minister's office, 2016c). The journalists viewed the role of political advisors as far more important than the civil servants did. This is explained by the fact that civil servants sometimes perform similar duties to the advisors, and sometimes even have the mandate to comment on things on behalf of the minister.

The top advisor is the main channel through which the PM or a minister can be reached when direct access is not possible: "They work as a buffer [...] so that the PM has some peace to work, to not let every single request go through" (Finnish journalist 5). In contrast, the GCD is considered to have a "ceremonial role"; it handles the PM's communications in official matters and is responsible for practicalities and formalities. Thus, the journalists described the GCD's role as limited, as it can be very useful with practicalities but is hardly ever decisive in a political sense. A senior-level civil servant's account gave further credence and detail to this view:

You could say that there are many coexisting staffs. There is the civil servant organisation which prepares legislation, presents the legislation, and even advises. To some extent, politically. And on the other hand, there are the ministers' political staffs, the advisors, who – even though they are not formally in charge – are actually in charge of the preparations and deal with those matters. In addition to that, they also take care of, you might say, pure party politics. (Finnish civil servant 5)

The political advisors agreed, regarding themselves as political and "intimately closer to the PM" than the civil servants (Finnish political advisor 3). Furthermore, one advisor's account of their role was very telling of the position in terms of power: "We, the political advisors, function as a filter between the PM and the GCD" (Finnish political advisor 2).

Note also that, formally speaking, the political advisors are themselves civil servants as well. This dual role breeds interesting considerations both for the political advisors and for research. While there seems to be a normative consensus that they are free to conduct themselves politically, the law requires them to follow the same codes of conduct as other civil servants. This important topic – described by political advisors as a "touchy subject" – warrants further research.

According to the accounts of both the civil servants and the political advisors, the top ministers (the party leaders) had the last say on communications strategies. A rule of thumb is that the bigger the issue, the more coordination there is. While the GCD may participate in planning and make recommendations, the politicians and their advisors are the ones who decide on the political substance and, to an extent, the timing. Here, political advisors seem to wield a lot of power, as noted in the following account of a civil servant:

Their role is quite significant. It might happen to be that the chief of the GCD is participating in the preparations, and then along comes a 23-year old special advisor who, with a political mandate, has the last word on what it says in the text. (Finnish civil servant 2)

The interviews also revealed signs of centralisation of communications under the PM and his office. First of all, journalists did not regard all ministries as being equally important to follow. Some of the journalists described a hierarchy of importance between the ministries: After the PMO comes the ministry of finance, then maybe foreign affairs or defence, and then all the rest. In the case of other ministries, the journalists also tended to focus on the political advisors to a greater extent. Thus, as a whole, the civil servant communicators of other ministries emerged as the least important actors in the whole communications scheme. Second, the government itself has introduced new doctrines that call for centralisation of communications to the GCD in horizontal matters. This is closely related to new strategic management philosophies used by recent governments (Kekkonen & Raunio, 2011) and ideas that call for further integration of communications to the PMO.

The civil servants gave a very coherent account of the division of labour between the PMO and the ministries. The GCD is responsible for the PM's communications and governmental communications as a whole, while the ministries' communication departments handle their own ministry's or minister's external communications – primarily communications about decisions. The political advisors supported this view. When asked about centralisation, the civil servants seemed a bit divided on the topic. Some agreed that centralisation has occurred, at least through the strategic management doctrines discussed above, while others regarded the system as quite decentralised. The ministries did a lot of communications on their own, and, numerically speaking, employed most of the media staff. We will return to the topic of centralisation in our concluding discussion.

When asked about distinct guidelines or documents that would steer communications efforts, the civil servants automatically referred to the law and the GCD's official guidelines. Apart from codes for crisis situations, these documents are public. Noticeably, the political advisors voiced a different attitude toward such guidelines, seeing them as “documents that emphasise dialogue, openness and all sorts of beautiful things. We try to live by them to some extent, as well” (Finnish political advisor 3). For bigger policy projects, distinct communications plans are established.

On the topic of externalising communications to consultants, the civil servants were somewhat divided. Some downplayed the role of such services, while others pointed out that their role has increased over the years. The political advisors invariably said that political parties use the services of professional PR companies and party-politically affiliated think tanks. However, both the political advisors and the civil servants confirmed that such services are (and ought to be) always paid by political parties, not the government. As for the government, the use of consultants is described as limited to projects regarding big reforms or visualisations of campaigns like the “Finland 100 years” project.

Civil relationships with healthy tension?

Our interviewees were asked to describe how the contact between political sources and journalists evolves: who initiates the contact and on what level does it occur? On the whole, contact is quite frequent and initiated by both sides. However, the respondents from all three groups agreed that most of the contact, quite naturally, is initiated by journalists.

Journalists often seem to have established a somewhat stable network of sources. According to accounts from both the journalists and the political advisors, journalists are eager to identify useful contacts whenever new actors emerge on the scene (e.g., a new minister with new advisors). A journalist's network of contacts usually includes actors not just from the government or the opposition, but also the civil society – NGOs, think tanks, scholars and activists, to name a few. Some of the journalists wanted to point out that there are many ex-politicians (or people close to the parties) in leading positions in NGOs. This indicates that informal interaction between politicians and journalists takes place in NGOs as well.

The civil servants stated that journalists initiate contact, but also hinted at the possibility of being more or less active themselves. Understandably, civil servants avoided taking the role of the instigator, but one of them mentioned that they are able to “do things” once a journalist has made contact.

In contrast to the civil servants, the political advisors openly said that they initiate contact in many cases – often in an attempt to wield influence. Such attempts are often accompanied by an explanation, like the need to “correct a story”. However, some advisors admitted that they initiate contact when it is in their interest to release some piece of information. In terms of the level of the contact, the advisors' answers are very similar to those of the civil servants discussed above. Sometimes the ministers themselves do the contacting, in which case it is often with a supervisor-level journalist.

The interviewees from all three groups were also asked to evaluate the nature and quality of the relationship between political sources and the media. Overall, all sides describe the relationship as good, but they are aware that the state of the relationships is bound to fluctuate over time. Typical answers from all sides described the relationship along the lines of “professional and civil”. The journalists often described their relationship with governmental sources as good and had little to complain about:

I do not think that the war drums are sounding or anything like that. They understand our job and we understand their job [...]. In my opinion, the relationships are simple, with no problems getting access within a reasonable amount of time.
(Finnish journalist 11)

As for the journalists' relationships with the GCD in particular, they seem to be good partially because the GCD's civil servants are not that important as sources. However, some of the more experienced journalists pointed out that using them as informal sources is not totally out of the question. The journalists seem pleased with the GCD's

handling of official communications. This is also verified in studies conducted by the GCD itself, where the great majority of respondents (journalists) expressed approval of how the basic duties of official communications are carried out (the results of these studies were provided for research use by the GCD).

However, due to their more important role, the relationships with political advisors are described in more colourful terms. Both the journalists and the political advisors refer to a mutual mood of “suspicion” between the two groups. The journalists said that relationships with the political advisors vary depending on personalities and activeness. For many of the journalists, the relationships with the political advisors seemed to be rather close due to frequent contact. Furthermore, some of the journalists even mentioned having had personal phone numbers of PMs at their disposal. However, the journalists emphasised that the relationships with the PM, like those with other political actors, vary between individual office holders.

The civil servants agreed with the notion of good and professional media relationships, voicing values such as trying to serve the media as well as they can. The civil servants in the GCD were aware that they are perceived as somewhat unimportant, and pointed out that this fits their role – their reluctance to comment is an established fact for all actors involved: “It is kind of our duty to be an information plug, up to the point that the law says we must be” (Finnish civil servant 3). On the other hand, “when a matter is made public, we make sure that it goes public as well as possible” (FC4). The senior civil servants described the Finnish media as overall good to work with and even “kind”. They also felt that political journalists usually tend to assess the actual relevance of what they are about to report and do not take to reporting gossip.

The political advisors also invariably described their relationships with journalists as “civil” and agreed that the relationships with the PM and other leading politicians are generally good, referring to them described them as “close” and “active”. At the same time there was a sense of “healthy tension” – the advisors said that they understand the critical nature of the media, and that journalists are right in focusing a lot of attention on the PM. However, some advisors also pointed out that policy criticism by media is often presented as criticism of the prime minister.

As for their relationships with the civil servants, the advisors’ descriptions were limited to a general characterisation of them as “good and professional”. However, in some cases, the civil servants were described as wanting to play a bigger role than the one they actually have. Note that both civil servants and political advisors refrained from commenting on their relationships with each other in much detail. This is particularly interesting given the tensions brought on by the dual role of the political advisors as outright politicians *de facto* and civil servants *de jure*.

As a whole, positive appraisals of the relationships between actors (journalists, civil servants, politicians and their advisors) dominated. However, the journalists’ descriptions of the relationships between political sources and the media revealed a distinct discourse of mutuality:

[B]oth sides are in contact with each other for beneficial purposes, and both sides are aware of this [...]. [They are] relationships of utility. (Finnish journalist 2)

The media needs politicians and politicians need the media. That is how it goes. But it depends on each individual journalist, how they build that relationship. (Finnish journalist 11)

It is a fairly functional relationship [laughs], because it is kind of symbiotic, in the sense that both sides need each other. (Finnish journalist 7)

This points to the game-theory aspect of the relationships that was discussed earlier. All interviewees were asked to describe the strategies that different actors involved in the game might use. Understandably, the civil servants were very brief in their accounts of various strategies to promote or delay information. Many of them expressed the view that as civil servants, they are not political actors as such, and the best way to promote information is to communicate it effectively and evenly. However, the senior civil servants acknowledged that they sometimes try to offer stories or points of view to the media, as “[y]ou have to know how to use the media as well” (Finnish civil servant 1).

In comparison, the journalists’ and political advisors’ accounts yield more detailed results. The journalists invariably mentioned tips and outright leaks as examples of strategies. More common and benign strategies include complaining about quotes or trying to choose which journalist will conduct an interview. Yet another common strategy is the framing of political issues, illustrated in the following account by a journalist: “When you take the initiative, you have the chance to make it so that a thing is called a ‘coercion law’ instead of a ‘competitiveness package’” (Finnish journalist 2). Background briefings were mentioned as an informal strategy used by politicians: “[The] background briefings that are arranged for journalists ... There they bring up something. They bring it up exactly because they want to set it in motion” (Finnish journalist 5). Only rarely does a leak constitute a full explanation of something that has happened outside of the public eye. Rather, leaks are often designed to only reveal those parts of a story that are most likely to harm a particular political rival. The journalists described how a small leak in many cases can effectively bring down an entire policy package.

On the other hand, the journalists also described many strategies that politicians and their advisors might use in order to delay information or prevent stories from being published. Many journalists said they had experienced attempts by advisors and politicians to demonstrate that there is “no story to tell” when currently working on a story. However, it should be noted that many journalists felt that there were no outright restraining attempts as such, but rather attempts to influence: “There is no way that anyone can prevent a story. Nor have I seen for ages that anyone would seriously even attempt anything like that” (Finnish journalist 7).

Overall, the most frequent strategy towards journalists is silence and avoidance, or at most, ambiguity. Aware of this, most journalists said that if there are “journalistic

grounds” to proceed with a story, they do – regardless of the political motivation of the source. In this regard, many referred to a kind of idea of pluralism over time, resulting from the fact that political actors from across the political spectrum attempt to do the same thing. The journalists also described a number of counter-strategies, the most important one being cross-examination of multiple sources.

Many of the strategies described by the political advisors fit the accounts given by journalists, commonly identifying tip-offs, total passivity and subtle avoidance. However, some strategies were known to only one of the sides. For instance, none of the journalists mentioned the idea of redirecting questions to other ministers or party officials as a politician’s strategy. The political advisors also described thinking of specific “spots” for communicating something pertaining to upcoming events, for example “dramatic environments” in which to speak of a particular topic to maximise media attention. Another strategy was to coin a new concept or a proposal in a seemingly unrelated speech at one of the many events a minister participates in. The political advisors, understandably, did not go into much detail, but agreed that there is a great variety of such strategies and that it is not very difficult for the PM to use them: “[T]he PM is a walking news piece” (Finnish political advisor 3). Precisely because of this fact, the advisors agreed that their general task is to never let journalists catch the minister off guard.

Change over time: Generational change and concerns about traditional media

All interviewees were asked to assess both short-term (5-10 years) and long-term (up to 30 years) changes. For the journalists, the most commonly mentioned change in the short-term perspective was the rising importance of social media. Some of the journalists felt that social media has served to cause a general sense of haste, which in turn can lower journalistic standards. Others felt that social media and other new communication channels have already challenged the position of the media:

Without a doubt it takes away from us, the traditional media, some of the gatekeeper privileges [...] Already as we speak, there are several ways to bypass the traditional media. A lot of routes to go past, and lots of people take those routes. And this will surely grow. (Finnish journalist 7)

However, some journalists pointed out that the impact of social media does not automatically translate into influence on political decision-making. For instance, unlike traditional journalists, blogger activists are not in the position to demand answers to their questions. Some of the more experienced journalists voiced a concern about how a general, malignant style of social media might influence the public debate, and meant that the role of social media in journalism therefore should be assessed critically. However, at best, social media can help to bring new sources to light and

broaden the spectrum of debate. Furthermore, social media has changed the way election campaigns are carried out, with MPs and candidates depending more on their virtual internet “constituencies”. On the topic of social media, the political advisors mostly agreed with the journalists, adding that for them, social media has highlighted the importance of reacting quickly and decisively to situations.

The civil servants identified yet another important short-term change, namely the increasing role of horizontal issues and work in the government. This was largely due to the strategic management philosophies and the introduction of so-called “key projects”, which require more coordination with individual ministries and, in effect, generate more centralisation of communications to the PMO.

In addition to these short-term changes, many interviewees identified similar changes in the longer perspective. Most interviewees in all three groups agreed that the amount of informal interaction has decreased during the past few decades. There are still considerable amounts of it left, but there has been a perceived shift towards “healthier” forms of informality:

They [informal relationships] have grown a bit more distant from what they used to be. They still exist, but before the campaign finance scandal it was stronger.⁶ That might have been one of the things to turn the tide [...] This culture of sitting evenings together has diminished. And the occasions where you see them nowadays, they are more formal. (Finnish journalist 7)

The “drinking days” of the 1970s and 1980s are gone – a notion referring to the somewhat mythical heyday of informality when journalists and politicians would spend long nights out together. Contemporary journalists were perceived as acting more professionally. All three groups shared this perception. It was also equally common that the interviewees had only heard about these relationships as legends told by older colleagues. Similarly, many interviewees described the “trusted reporter” institution of previous times as having vanished for the most part. It remains an open question as to whether such arrangements still exist to some extent, in a different form. Isotalus and Almonkari (2014: 301) report similar findings in their study of party leaders and media in Finland:

The confrontation between the media and politicians is evident, and its development is seen as a new phenomenon. However, the media representatives thought that the confrontation between [media professionals] and politicians is a good thing. It was considered that earlier the relationships between journalists and politicians were too close, with a negative influence on reporting. This development suggests that the relationship between politicians and journalists has become increasingly professional.

However, the most important long-term change described by all three groups is the crisis of traditional media. To some extent, the two phenomena are related to each other, as described in the following account by an experienced journalist:

The relationships might have become a bit more professional [...] To put it briefly: westernised and professionalised. With the difference that in Finland politicians are

still more accessible and interact more with journalists than in many countries [...] And it has its upsides and downsides [...] Yet I would name the media's economy as the biggest threat. In Finland, as in many countries, the media is in such a poor economic state that there is a pressure to commercialise, go light, entertain [...] Surely it must add to the difficulty factor. In an ever more complex and fast-paced world, how do you give people relevant information – information that they are not even interested in? [...] This is a shared problem, how to deal with this. (Finnish journalist 8)

Most of the journalists voiced the same concern about how the big changes in the media field, most notably its dwindling resources, threaten the quality of political journalism. Other factors associated with this are the speed demanded by the internet and social media, and the increasing competition for people's time. The civil servants agreed, pointing out that the advent of so-called "click journalism" seems to have brought along a degree of sensationalism in contemporary political journalism. The political advisors talked extensively about this theme, expressing that journalists no longer seem to have time to be careful in their work. The advisors also pointed out that the fragmentation of media formats makes it more difficult for politicians to estimate what kind of publicity they are going to get, and for what benefit.

Most interestingly, all three groups shared a concern for the future of traditional media. This might be one of the clearest indicators of mutuality, even "symbiosis", in politics-media relationships. The plight of the media as a field is not regarded as a victory by the political side, but rather as a shared problem.

Other interesting developments

In this section, we bring up additional, interesting features that emerged during the interviews. The first one is how the observed changes in the media field influence the traditional interdependency of journalists and the government. Interviewees in *all groups* worried that new types of media actors or other "forces" might pose challenges for the system. Consider these journalists' accounts:

On the other hand, you have all sorts [of fake news websites] which are totally reckless even from the politicians' point of view. So in that sense, politicians, too, need this civil, normal media to counterweigh these rumour sites and fake media outlets. (Finnish journalist 2)

The way I see it [the new actors], our relation to politicians will not be affected. You would think that they would view traditional journalists as more reliable and stable compared to all these phony editing sites. You would think that it would strengthen the relationship rather than anything else. (Finnish journalist 9)

Above, a prospect of increasing cooperation, even closeness, between political sources and the media is visible. Ironically, this might be the very phenomenon that contributed

to the rise of these new media actors in the first place: the idea of traditional media having lost its watchdog role. In this regard, some of the journalists mentioned that the populist Finns Party displays a somewhat non-cooperative behaviour towards the media. Some credited this to a lack of experience, but also to a notion of the populists having an *ideological* dislike of traditional media. The civil servants pointed out that drawing a distinction between “real” media and other actors is certainly a challenge for official communications. Here, the case of Jari Hanska is mentioned as an example. Hanska is a freelancer whom the ministry of finance prohibited from participating in a background briefing (Union of Journalists in Finland, 2016). However, the case can also be seen as an example of the ethical difficulties involved in organising briefings with limited invitations (also discussed above).

The future role of Yle as a state-owned, public broadcasting company is also subject to increasing political interest – including, but not limited to, the crisis referred to in the introductory section of this chapter. This is noteworthy, considering that many interviewees from all three groups mentioned PM Sipilä’s TV speech to the people when asked to identify an interesting case of Finnish leader-media relationships. Respondents from all groups considered the speech “exceptional” and “a very interesting” journalistic decision by Yle. The topic is highly sensitive for both sides and it may well be that the issue would have been brought up even more if the interviews had been carried out after PM Sipilä had approached the reporters in Yle about the Terrafame case. The following analogy by one journalist hinted towards a perceived presidentialisation in the role of the prime minister:

Sure, it was very exceptional. And that is what it looked like [...] We know that Kekkonen [the powerful president of Finland from 1956 to 1981], for example, used television in this way, as a direct contact for a charismatic leader. Presidents have had this opportunity, but not prime ministers. It is a very exceptional speech, indeed. (Finnish journalist 12)

Interviewees from all groups equally mentioned that many key variables in leader-media relationships, particularly access and the nature of the relationships, depended a lot on the persona of the PM, minister or even political advisor in question. Each PM brings her or his own personality to the equation, with some clearly being more comfortable in dealing with the media than others. Essentially all prime ministers have encountered their share of problems with the media (see Uimonen, 2011). Furthermore, judging by the answers of journalists and political advisors, it seems that there is variation between political parties in how they handle media relations. Among the journalists, at least, there seemed to be a perception that the National Coalition Party is exceptionally skilled and active in using the leader-media system to their advantage.⁷

Concluding remarks

The relationships between top-level politicians, political advisors and journalists display some interesting features that fall back on the *longue durée* of Finnish political history. The civil servants still maintain an autonomous position, quite different from more politicised administrations in the other Nordic countries. This creates an ambiguous position for political advisors that have a *de facto* party-political mandate but a *de jure* more objective status to consider when carrying out their – often politically motivated – tasks. The role of political advisors, especially vis-à-vis the civil servants, is clearly a touchy subject deserving of closer examination. Here, one must also remember that there are no “spokespersons” in the Finnish structure: public comments to the media about government decisions are provided by the PM and other ministers, certainly not by the political advisors and only rather infrequently by civil servants.

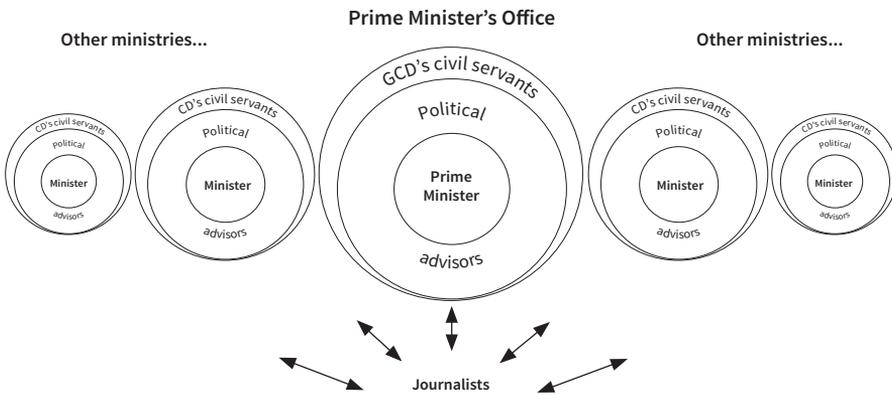
Journalists apparently understand the situation and play the game without blowing the whistle on formal grounds – at least as long as they themselves feel that they can benefit from the set-up. With growing distances and increasingly formal relationships between politicians and journalists, the civil servants, who perform duties between the two groups, may become subject to growing tensions. Such a development may be further fed by a tendency among politicians to use direct appeals through social media. Before, journalists were gatekeepers and had a stronger position in designing how news was delivered. In addition, both politicians and journalists have strongly embraced social media, particularly Twitter, and it may be possible to claim that the old days of drinking together have been replaced with close ties through smartphones.

The increasing importance of political advisors is related to the centralisation of government communication. Civil servants described the centralisation of communications to the PMO as something pertaining to strategic management thinking in recent governments. Centralisation also appears to be driven by an increasing use of horizontal policy packages, and perhaps by ideological heterogeneity; Finnish multi-party cabinets typically bring together parties that have quite different preferences. In 2016, the working group appointed by the PMO to assess the communications of the government and individual ministries essentially called for more centralisation of communications:

Based on its findings, the working group calls for greater coordination between the government and the ministries in how communications activities are carried out [...] The working group recommends the responsibility and mandate that are essential for coordinating communications to be included in the government programme and that these should be defined and updated in greater detail in the government action plan [...] If the recommendation is followed, all the government communications will be integrated with the primary responsibility assumed by the prime minister’s office. (Prime minister’s office, 2016c)

At the same time, the interviewed journalists described a similar trend in their own behaviour as they tend to follow the PMO and certain key ministries more closely than other ministries. This development is summarised in Figure 2.2, which should be compared with the official organisation chart of the PMO (Figure 2.1 above). From the journalists' point of view, the importance of sources, in declining order, was as follows: (1) the PM, (2) his political advisors, who exercise political power in communications over (3) the GCD's civil servants. This scheme repeats itself for each ministry, leaving the civil servant communicators of individual ministries in the least important position.

Figure 2.2 Governmental sources from the journalists' perspective



Amidst all the changes in the media system as well as inside the government, our interviews clearly show that journalism still counts. Old habits die hard, and MPs, ministers and journalists still regularly interact face-to-face, particularly in the premises of the Eduskunta. Both sides appreciate the by and large constructive relationships between politicians and the media. Despite much talk of increasing professionalism and distance in these relationships, our results show that informal interaction and private contacts remain an integral feature of the Finnish system (see also Noppari, 2010). Nonetheless, as news is delivered through various channels – more or less directly from the source – journalists may find their future role to be more similar to that of pundits or interpreters of political affairs. Such tendencies can already be observed – in Finland but perhaps foremost in the tough disputes between the president and legacy media in the United States. This may cause an elitisation of political journalism, where the most prominent political journalists become more like experts providing coverage to a circle of politically interested citizens.

Notes

1. Particularly well-known cases from the past include the critique of prime minister Kalevi Sorsa (Social Democrats) in 1984 against the media for taking an improper role in the democratic process, leading to “infocracy”, and the boycott of President Mauno Koivisto in 1985, exercising pressure on the public broadcasting company to pre-check any reuse of citations, the so-called “citation conflict”.
2. Interestingly, the Finnish political system has also been noted for the small-scale and tight connections among its elites that cover not only the political side but also business interests, trade unions and the media (Ruostetsaari, 2015).
3. The Finns Party split after Jussi Halla-aho was elected new party leader at the party conference in June 2017. Halla-aho, convicted in court for hate speech, and the party leadership look set to take the party economically further to the right whilst engaging in hard-line attacks on immigration and multiculturalism. Immediately following the election of Halla-aho, Timo Soini, who had chaired the Finns Party since 1997, and the more moderate wing of the party left the Finns Party and established a parliamentary group of their own, the Blue Reform. This enabled Soini and his colleagues to remain in government.
4. For legal reasons, civil servants have to be more careful in this regard. This tendency was also noted by Vesa and Kananen (2014) in their interview study on Finnish civil servants, political actors and representatives of NGOs.
5. This shift has been identified as pre- and post-Watergate journalism; see Aula (1991). For a more detailed look at Finnish political journalists’ self-understanding and ethical views, see Välvirronen (2018).
6. Since the 2007 elections, Finland had been governed by a coalition between the Centre Party, the National Coalition, the Green League and the Swedish People’s Party. By midterm, the Finnish political establishment was shaken by party finance scandals. The debate about party funding erupted in May 2008 when Timo Kalli, a senior Centre MP, announced that he had deliberately left out certain donors from the public notification of the financing of his 2007 election campaign as this was legally possible. While Kalli and most of the other MPs later informed the media of their sources of campaign income, such behaviour fuelled doubts and concerns about the trustworthiness of politicians and where parties were getting their money. The scandal was particularly troubling for the leading government party, the Centre, because the party had close links with, and received considerable financial support from, Kehittyvien maakuntien Suomi, an organisation explicitly set up to defend the interests of the rural constituencies and financed by wealthy businessmen with rather questionable reputations. As the Centre and National Coalition MPs were the main (however not the only) beneficiaries of such funds, the government was attacked strongly by the media and the opposition for its hesitant approach in dealing with the scandal. A snowball effect ensued, with the police starting investigations about the links between interest groups and several leading politicians, including PM Matti Vanhanen. While the government stayed in office, there was nonetheless an awkward sense of sleaze permeating the entire domestic political landscape, adding to earlier concerns about trade unions funding left-wing parties.
7. Interviewees in an earlier study by Juntunen (2011) unanimously agreed that the National Coalition is the most efficient party in terms of media relations. In his comprehensive study of Finnish elites, Ruostetsaari (2014) observed that the media elite is notably aligned with the National Coalition.

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