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#Sipilägate and the break-up of the political bromance

Crisis in the relationship between Finnish media and politicians

What is happening in Finland? Prime Minister Juha Sipilä mail-bombs public service broadcaster YLE over a single news story, YLE management reacts by scaling down coverage, a well-known TV personality is threatened with sacking, three high-profile YLE journalists resign in protest. Debates and investigations follow one another, and both Prime Minister and YLE are reproached by the Council for Mass Media for their actions. As a consequence, Finland loses its number one position in Press Freedom Index 2017. #Sipilägate can be read as a symptom of several developments. While Juha Sipilä appears as “a little Trump” representing an accelerating global distrust in media, the prolonged public dispute also signals a crisis in the traditionally close relationship between Finnish media and leading politicians.

On Friday November 25, 2016, the Finnish public broadcaster YLE published an online story that infuriated Prime Minister Juha Sipilä. Since then, YLE’s journalism has been an object of public debate and investigation.¹

What first seemed to be a top politician losing his temper and judgement over a single story appears now, five months later, to be a case of politicians’ distrust in the quality of the media, which has become highly visible as a global phenomenon since the US presidential election. What is at stake is not only the status and independence of YLE’s public service news and actualities, but also the political public sphere as we know it.²

The close relationship between media and politicians, characteristic of Finnish political culture, is changing. Furthermore, #sipilägate has engendered tensions within the Finnish media landscape, bringing them to the fore.

#Sipilägate as #Ylegate

In the YLE online story in question, the prime minister’s relatives were revealed as owners of a company which had been awarded a contract worth half a million euros by the state-owned firm Terrafame, “just days after the Prime Minister approved a hundred million euros in additional funding for the mine”.³

While the story built on a scoop of *Kansan Uutiset*, a left-wing weekly newspaper from the previous day, it was YLE’s coverage that provoked the prime minister, who denied any conflict of interest in a quick blog entry, accusing YLE of publishing incorrect facts and insinuations and of smearing not only himself but also his children and relatives. He complained about not having had a chance to comment on the news, or having been given too little time to react, and questioned the

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Finland's Prime Minister since 2015, Juha Sipilä (the Centre Party) is a millionaire and former businessman who has been reluctant in answering journalists' questions about his assets and investments. This has resulted in a strenuous relationship not only with public service broadcaster but media in general.

overall relevance of investigating potential conflicts of interest.⁴

The news story evolved into a full-blown media scandal five days later as *Suomen Kuvalehti*, with sources inside YLE, revealed the extent of the prime minister's mail-bombing and accused YLE's editorial management of halting several stories as a result of political pressure.⁵

Not only had Sipilä phoned and texted the editor-in-chief, Atte Jääskeläinen, several times; he also sent seventeen e-mails over the course of Friday and Saturday to journalist Salla Vuorikoski. As a complaint over the coverage, Sipilä spent Friday evening forwarding angry e-mails he had received from citizens to Vuorikoski. He criticised YLE for acting as a political opposition: "My respect for YLE is now exactly zero, which of course is no different from yours for me. So now we're even".⁶

In his response, Atte Jääskeläinen firmly denied having encountered political pressure, stating the motivation behind his decision to change the coverage and to cancel follow-up

stories as a purely journalistic act aimed at giving the overall coverage an appropriate scale and preventing further "speculation". Curiously, he also justified the scaling down of coverage with the need to allow the parliamentary ombudsman to conduct an "undisturbed" (työrauha) investigation into Sipilä's liaisons with Terrafame.⁷ He also denied ever having prohibited all coverage of Sipilä and Terrafame in news and actualities in the following week, a claim that many YLE journalists have testified as false.⁸

At a press conference, Juha Sipilä regretted having sent too many e-mails, apologised for his "emotional" reaction, explained it with reference to his sensitivity regarding his family and described his relationship with YLE as "OK".⁹ He continued to accuse YLE of violating the guidelines for journalists, claiming he was merely correcting facts and underlining his right to "be heard".

As the subsequent investigation and ruling of the Council for Mass Media, the self-regulating committee for publishers and journalists, have shown, however, the news story featured

no factual mistakes. Sipilä had also been given due chance to comment on the ownership issue in *Kansan Uutiset*, and the guidelines for journalists had thus been followed.¹⁰

Following investigations in February 2017, the parliamentary ombudsman cleared Sipilä of any suspicion that he might have worked to benefit his family or relatives at any stage in the Terrafame funding process. However, the prime minister was subsequently reprimanded by the Council for Mass Media for exerting pressure on the public broadcaster and by the Deputy Chancellor of Justice for not manifesting support for the freedom of speech in the media, as expected from a person in his position.¹¹

In a unanimous, historic and dramatic statement, the Council for Mass Media contended that Prime minister had not only exerted political pressure but also curbed freedom of speech. However, the statement hardly generated any political debate in Finland.

Self-censorship or “fair play”?

As for YLE, #Sipilägate has entailed a prolonged crisis. High-profile journalists have resigned, accusing editorial leaders of limiting freedom of speech and compromising journalistic ethics. Moreover, Ruben Stiller, the presenter of the weekly current affairs TV programme *Pressiklubi*, who was issued with a written warning in conjunction with #Sipilägate, will step down from prime time.¹²

All of the four journalists involved in the publication of the original news story on Sipilä and Terrafame have left the YLE newsroom. The governing bodies of YLE, the board and the Administrative Council, have repeatedly expressed support for CEO Lauri Kivinen and the editor-in-chief of news and actualities, Atte Jääskeläinen, who have referred to organisational problems and the introduction of new management structures and have blamed critics for insufficient or deviating journalistic standards.¹³

In response to accusations of self-censorship and lack of freedom of speech, the YLE board of directors has commissioned an inde-

pendent inquiry into its journalistic decision-making. The inquiry, composed by Professor of Law Olli Mäenpää (University of Helsinki), will be published in May.

In March, however, the Council for Mass Media ruled against YLE, condemning – after a close vote – YLE’s newsroom management for giving into pressure from the prime minister. YLE was reprimanded for violating two key journalistic guidelines: not resisting outside pressure and surrendering journalistic decision-making to an outside party.¹⁴

The editor-in-chief Atte Jääskeläinen, obviously, could not admit to violating major press rules and referred to the decision as “a decision by half the council”. Jääskeläinen, furthermore, continues to argue that the real crisis is not the political pressure but the desire of journalists within YLE to question the kind of “responsible journalism based on rules of fair play” that he would like to promote.¹⁵

A broken bromance?

The detailed documentation attached to the Council for Mass Media’s ruling on YLE, featuring testimonies by participating journalists and members of editorial management, reads like a fascinating testimony of the relationships between public service media and politicians.

Whereas politicians in Sweden reportedly avoid contacting journalists directly, many Finnish journalists have commented on #ylegate by describing contacts by politicians as a normal, common practice with long historical roots. At the same time, of course, they have asserted that the pressure has never impacted on journalism. Prime Minister Juha Sipilä’s e-mails have been described by both Atte Jääskeläinen and Sipilä himself as “feedback”.¹⁶

With its ruling on YLE, the Council for Mass Media has broken the conventional consensus and what appears to be a national code of conduct by referring to the decisions of YLE’s editorial management as surrendering to external pressure. In so doing, the Council contends that the violation of the sec-

ond journalistic guideline is not a dramatic choice or conscious decision but a banal process whereby the editor-in-chief, within 30 minutes of the prime minister's first angry contact, starts editing an online news story that features no factual mistakes and changes his plans regarding how the story would be covered in radio and TV news. The dramatic effect of the Council's ruling is the unveiling of the everydayness of the undramatic manner in which media independence is compromised.

Given Prime Minister Sipilä's unwillingness to recognise his responsibility to support journalism as a founding democratic institution – independent of individual news stories – it is tempting to see Sipilä as “ein kleiner Trump”, to cite *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*.¹⁷ Rejecting all accusations of an exertion of political pressure, Sipilä has not once questioned the politics of his own actions or the public responsibility he has as the prime minister of a majority government making decisions about YLE's budget. He has insisted on his right as an individual to “give feedback”, regretting only the force and tone used.

Interestingly, it seems that the relationship between government and the media in Finland is brought to crisis by politicians such as the prime minister – or the populist Finns' Party (Perussuomalaiset) – not the journalists themselves.

In the new media landscape, the politicians of a country that takes pride in occupying the top spot in the Press Freedom Index¹⁸ nevertheless decline to treat journalism as a founding democratic institution and instead frame media as a political opponent, capitalising on popular distrust.

From this perspective, the journalists' comments on the normalcy of Prime Minister Sipilä's “feedback” can be read as a desperate wooing, a sign of the historical vicinity and mutual dependence, the historical mostly male romance, between media and politicians breaking up. While the prime minister might still refer to the editor-in-chief of YLE news and actualities as “Atte”, this degree of familiarity and intimacy may be a vanishing praxis.¹⁹

What now?

While it is too early to draw conclusions regarding the ongoing crisis, it is evident that #Sipilägate has consequences for both YLE and the wider Finnish mediascape. It is already known that due to political pressure, Finland has lost its number one position on the Reporters without Borders' Press Freedom Index.²⁰

Unlike the Council for Mass Media or many commentators in the public debate, YLE's management systematically refuses to recognise that its actual dependence on politicians for its financing entails a risk to its journalistic independence.²¹ Atte Jääskeläinen recognises the politicisation of media and the growing distrust, but in his vision, YLE's journalism takes a bird's-eye view, standing above this debate and acting as a constructive force in society.²²

While it may be a noble idea, it is highly unrealistic since the politicisation of media increases pressure on public service media.²³ The Finnish parliament is currently discussing the government's proposal to change the law on Yleisradio to enable even stronger political control than before.

The proposal, based on a parliamentary compromise from June 2016, recommends a strengthening of the role of the administrative council, which, according to contemporary praxis, consists of members of parliament and reflects the actual political situation of each election term.²⁴ If the law is changed accordingly, parliament enforces a praxis whereby the YLE board of directors, including the editor-in-chief of news and actualities, discusses the company's future plans directly with the same politicians who determine the funding and guidelines for public service media. In Finland, the public broadcaster is not regulated by fixed concession terms with conjoining budget decisions. Instead, the media tax introduced in 2013 has been discussed annually by politicians.

While the prime minister has appealed to popular sympathy as a victim of media scandal, #Sipilägate has fuelled the popular debate about “elite media” (“valtamedia” in Finnish) enforcing the idea of the media promoting agendas of political and other elites. Finns are traditionally eager news consumers, and in

international comparison, as in *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (2016), Finns show an exceptionally high level of trust in news organisations. Sixty-five per cent say most news can be trusted, and just under half of Finns deem Finnish media mostly independent of the influence of politicians, government or companies. This, however, may be changing as other questionnaires show signs of growing distrust and scepticism.²⁵

#Sipilägate also challenges the unanimity of mainstream news organisations in Finland, which is evident in the exceptionally strong status of the Council of Mass Media as well as journalists taking pride in the strong professional culture of a non-partisan media. During the past year, the association of editors-in-chief published two collective statements aimed at highlighting journalistic professional standards: one rejecting the practices and pressure of fake media and the other stressing the role and responsibility of the editor-in-chief.²⁶ Notions of CMM-media – one who respects the ethical code established and guarded by the Council of Mass Media – and “responsible media” (punnittu media) were introduced as gestures against distrust in traditional media.

While the role of the Council as a weapon against fake media and what some call the “post-factual age” has become increasingly important, paradoxically, the Council’s authority

has also been questioned. On one hand, the prime minister threatened YLE with complaints to the Council but declined to summon a statement when invited and ignored the reprimands of the Council. On the other hand, editors-in-chief who have received conviction rulings by the Council have deviated from the common praxis of not commenting on them or objecting to them. As for rulings on YLE, Jääskeläinen voiced his “differing opinion”, and the CEO Lauri Kivinen called the decision “an interpretation”.²⁷

Finally and fundamentally, #Sipilägate as #Ylegate has revealed highly differing interpretations of the first guideline for journalists: “A journalist is primarily responsible to the readers, listeners and viewers, who have the right to know what is happening in society”.

Within YLE, the internal debate was about whether the prime minister’s emails and comments on YLE were newsworthy at all – whether the general public had a right to know about them. In the wider debate on YLE, there are differing opinions as to whether journalistic decisions constitute topics for public debate or whether they should be discussed within newsrooms themselves. In other words, #Sipilägate not only challenges the relationships between media and politicians, but also the power structures within newsrooms and the social role of journalism itself.

Notes

1. Yle (2016a), Liski, Eronen & Vuorikoski (2016), Vuorikoski (2016).
2. Koivunen (2016b), Koivunen (2017a).
3. Alén (2016), Yle (2016a).
4. Sipilä (2016).
5. Kauppinen (2016).
6. Vuorikoski (2016), Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2017d, 2017e).
7. Jääskeläinen (2016).
8. Kauppinen (2016), Teittinen (2016); Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2017e).
9. Sutinen (2016).
10. Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2017a).
11. Yle (2017a), Justitiekanslerämbetet (2017), Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2017b).
12. Yle (2016b), Koivunen (2016c), Ahola (2017), Yle (2017b), Teittinen & Manner (2017).
13. Jääskeläinen (2016), Yle (2016b, 2016c).
14. Yle (2017c), Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2017c).
15. Yle (2017d), Jääskeläinen (2017b).
16. Kahilainen (2016), Ylönen (2016). See also Koivunen (2016b).
17. Reinvere (2016).
18. Reporters without Borders (2017).
19. Auvinen (2016).
20. Yle (2017e).
21. Helsingin Sanomat (2016); Mukka (2017), Koivunen (2017a, 2017b).
22. Jääskeläinen (2017a), Koivunen (2017b).
23. Koivunen (2016a, 2017b, 2017 forthcoming).
24. Liikenne- ja viestintäministeriö (2017).
25. Newman et al. (2016), Grönlund & Wass (2016), Koivunen (2017b).
26. Julkisen sanan neuvosto (2016), Päätoimittajien yhdistys (2017).
27. Tiikkaja (2017), Blenkowe (2017).

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