

Chapter 8

Power and exchange in formal and informal interaction between journalists and their sources

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Abstract

This chapter sets out to answer a number of questions concerning the relationship between media and political executives in political communication, centring on how the exchange and power balance between journalists and their political sources differ depending on whether the interaction is formal or informal. The results are based on 43 qualitative interviews with journalists who cover national politics and governmental press advisors in Lithuania and Sweden. The findings indicate that formal interaction is advantageous for professional sources in agenda-based news. In non-agenda news and in times of political conflict, journalists as well as some political sources prefer informal interaction. While top political leaders and their press advisors are most often isolated from informal interactions, other political sources might gain from communicating informally. Finally, the results show that media–source exchange in informal relationships reaches beyond “information in exchange for publicity” and that informal relationships allow participants to step outside their traditional professional roles.

Keywords: journalist-source relations, interaction, informality, professionalisation, political communication, exchange

Introduction

Journalist-source relationships are interdependent, and in the political beat the exchange between a journalist and his/her sources can last for decades. A senior journalist from a renowned media channel rather casually described a journalist-source situation as just another day at work: “I can drop by the prime minister’s simply to ask, ‘What’s up?’ And the prime minister sometimes calls me and complains about the opposition” (Lithuanian journalist 7). In this case, the relationship started years ago when the now prime minister was head of some committee and the journalist was a junior reporter. Since then, they have been meeting each other in the parliament corridors and during and after press conferences, verifying facts and perhaps staying for a drink after work.

Most studies of journalist-source relations focus on the formal interaction, i.e., interaction that is on the record, documented, and most often visible to others. The in-

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terdependency between journalists and their sources in this interaction is traditionally summarised as “information in exchange for publicity” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995).

At the same time, there is scholarly agreement that informal relationships are an important component in political communication (Pfetsch & Esser, 2012). However, the empirical research on these types of relationships is limited (Kamps, 2013). The lack of research risks simplifying our knowledge about what real trade-offs both sides are making to achieve their professional goals.

In response to this gap, this chapter aims to understand whether the process of the exchange between journalists and political sources differs between formal and informal situations and how this difference is reflected in the balance of power between 1) journalists and the sources and 2) different groups of sources. The chapter addresses the following questions:

- How do journalists and their sources perceive and use formal interaction in their professional work?
- How do journalists and their sources perceive and use informal interaction in their professional work?
- What are the differences in the perceived power and exchange between journalists and their sources depending on the chosen type of interaction?

Media systems as well as the formal organisation of government communication differ from country to country. The chapter therefore expects informal interaction and norms to be culturally bound and context dependent as well. However, it is an empirical question to find out whether this is the case. Formal and informal interaction in journalist–source relations can be seen as two sides of the same coin because many situations include both formal and informal aspects. The way formal communication is organised, therefore, is likely reflected in how the respondents perceive and use informal relationships.

Current research often emphasises the need for data from different countries and cross-country comparison. So far, the country chapters of this book demonstrate that, despite the differences in country size, media system, or government communication patterns, the informal part of the journalist–source interaction is considered to be an inevitable component in political communication. Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska and Jacek Nożewski note the importance of maintaining professional boundaries and being aware of each other’s interests even in informal situations (in Poland). They also emphasise that informal interaction is vital to achieving professional goals. In another chapter, Tapio Raunio, Tom Moring, and Risto Niemikari discuss the benefits of informal exchange for journalists and their sources. In the Finnish case, the importance of informality was even defined in documents provided by the government communications department, stating that “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”.

This chapter goes deeper into examples from two contrasting cases: Sweden and Lithuania. The results are based on 43 qualitative interviews with journalists and professionalised political sources, represented by governmental and presidential press advisors, in Sweden and Lithuania. Results show that Sweden is an example of professionalised and centralised political communication, where governmental communication efforts are coordinated with the prime minister's office and journalistic professionalisation is strong. In Lithuania, political communication is still under professionalisation, communication efforts are less coordinated, and political journalism is less professionalised than in Sweden. The chapter also concludes that both countries face similar pressures in the media market.

Power and exchange in journalist-source relations

To fully understand the effects of, for example, professionalised political communication or cuts in newsroom budgets on political journalism and communication, it is beneficial to analyse formal as well as informal interactions and the norms related to them within the same context, at the same time. It is reasonable to expect that norms and exchange practices in formal interactions between journalists and their political sources affect norms and practices in informal relations and vice versa. The relationship between journalists and their sources is often described as a negotiated, interdependent exchange. Both sides are adaptive, role-regulated actors acting in a "shared culture" (Davis, 2009; Larsson, 2002). Cooperation in these relationships is based on trust, which in turn depends on personal ties, perception and knowledge about each other's intentions, experiences from the past, or expectations about future cooperation. Hence, both journalists and their sources have to trust each other, i.e., "to believe that the results of somebody's intended action will be appropriate from our point of view" (Misztal, 1996: 24). Pfetsch (2014) describes the interdependency between journalists and sources as a co-created, reflexive relationship where each side contributes to and influences the expectations of the other side.

Another central discussion in the research of journalism and political communication is the discussion of power. Power can be conceptualised as "a struggle over meaning and the ability of individuals or groups to control and shape interpretations" (Mumby, 2001: 595). The question "Who is leading whom?", asked initially by Sigal (1973) and Gans (1979), has been posed many times. The insights of Sigal (1973) suggest that the power to instigate stories is in the hands of sources, as they have better access to information. These insights are still supported several decades later (Reich, 2009). However, in the steps of framing and editing the final copy, journalists have more power (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006). Therefore, power over media content varies depending on the stage (information gathering, verification, final editing) in the news-making process.

It should be possible to expand the knowledge regarding power, exchange, and trust in journalist-source relations by considering that sources are not a homog-

enous group. In that case, competition among different types of sources to get their message through also matters. Studies show how the possibilities for sources to get their message through vary depending on a number of circumstances. For example, journalists might prefer some sources over others, depending on their perceived trustworthiness or a long-lasting cooperation with these sources. As an illustration, efforts by spin doctors are more likely to be successful in situations where alternative sources are not available (Manning, 2001). This could explain why staffing up ministers' communication departments does not necessarily imply more power over communication for the minister. Journalistic training and professional values usually generate a certain amount of scepticism toward PR staff, and as a result, journalists at times consider press advisors to be burdens rather than sources who provide information.

A source who is able to persuade journalists about what angle of the news is the most important and a journalist who manages to access exclusive information can be said to have power. Such power is achieved by choosing successful working strategies regarding with whom, when, and how to make contact given different situations. On the one hand, there is a chance that a developed political communication machinery, which has diminished direct access to the politicians and developed pre-made content production, gives more power to sources – in particular to sources with a strong communications team. On the other hand, an *éminence grise* in a political party who acts behind the scenes and is perceived to be a trustworthy source in the eyes of journalists can be much more powerful than any press advisor when it comes to influencing how journalists will define different political matters.

Therefore, it is important to consider whether some forms of interaction grant more power to journalists, sources, or maybe only to a particular group of sources. This chapter approaches this matter by distinguishing between formal and informal interaction.

Formal and informal interaction

Previous scholarship focusing on the relationship between journalists and sources does not offer an established definition of informal relationships. According to Baugut and Reinemann (2013: 25), this is partly the reason why little is still known about this type of communication. According to the authors, situations that “are planned, follow certain fixed rules, occur in the context of repeatedly held events, [use] standard language [and] have a more or less official character” can be described as formal. Misztal (2000: 18-19) defines the terms “informality” and “informal” as “more intimate, face-to-face social relationships or more personal modes of social control or types of social organization and pressures” and a “feature of interpersonal, less routine, less rigid and less ceremonial relationships, which rely more on tacit knowledge than on prescribed norms”. According to Baugut and Reinemann (2013: 25), informal relationships are “more spontaneous” and “off-the-record” and include “acting beyond

role expectation”; most importantly, “the content of the communication can remain invisible to the public”.

In the scope of this research, the same situation might contain both formal and informal elements. A press conference and conversations behind the scenes following the press conference are examples of the fine line between formality and informality. In the context of this chapter, the analysis gives account to how the actors themselves perceive the situation. Interactions that are planned, public, and documented, and where journalists and their sources do not know each other very well, are called “formal”. Interactions that are off the record, that include references on a first-name basis, or where the actors know each other outside the working context, are called “informal”.

How journalists view the presence of informal contacts and friends among political sources also varies between countries. In some countries, informal interactions are seen as a necessity, while in others they are considered to conflict with professional values (Cammarano & Medrano, 2014). Norms and values guiding journalist–source relations also vary between professional cultures (Pfetsch, 2014). For journalists, having personal contacts and an informal access to their sources might increase their chances of acquiring exclusive information before their competitors (Baugut & Reinemann, 2013). Politicians might also be interested in maintaining more informal contacts. For example, those who disagree with the communication strategies might prefer to have the option to reach out to the media directly, because the official communication does not serve their needs. This case also demonstrates how conditions on the formal level are likely to affect outcomes on the informal level.

Existing research provides ambiguous answers about whether interactions between journalists and their political sources are becoming more formal or informal. According to Davis (2010), who studied the relationship between journalists and political sources in Great Britain, the growing demand for efficiency that politicians and journalists are facing resulted in fewer opportunities for informal communication. This is because informality requires investments in the form of building trust and time-intensive, face-to-face conversations. Granovetter (1983) finds that newsrooms are reducing their staff, and fewer journalists must now deal with a growing number of communication professionals or other types of officers serving the politicians. The journalist-source relationship no longer relies on a few strong social ties, but rather on a wider social network and a greater number of weaker ties. According to the study, this could potentially lead to more formalised and routine political public relations, which would empower sources, i.e., professional communicators and political leaders.

German scholars Baugut and Reinemann (2013) studied how politicians tend to share information with journalists informally during political negotiations and in this way mediatise the political process. The politicians who act as informal sources and leak information possibly gain more communication power and fight the political battle through the media. The study concludes that, although political communication is being professionalised, informal communication between journalists and politicians remains important for both sides.

The results of the two last studies are clearly contradictory: in Great Britain, the formal sources seem to gain more power, while in Germany, informal channels are still important. A possible explanation could be that each of the studies focused exclusively on a single-country context. However, this also underlines the risks involved in treating sources as a single homogenic group that follows the same interactional pattern and either gains or loses power in specific situations. This study avoids this peril by distinguishing between formal and informal interaction and analysing how different types of sources use these types of interaction in professional work. The aim is to understand whether power and the content of exchange between journalists and sources differ between informal and formal interactions.

Methods and data

The results in this chapter are based on 43 qualitative, semi-structured interviews in Lithuania and Sweden with journalists who cover national politics in the main media outlets (newspapers, TV, radio, news agencies, and professional Internet news sites) and press advisors to the ministers and the prime minister (Sweden and Lithuania) and the president's press advisor (Lithuania). Press advisors do not necessarily provide the same view as politicians. However, they are the actors who are directly involved, or even driving, the professionalisation of political communication. They also have first-hand knowledge about the communication styles and routines of the politicians they represent, making them relevant informants in this study.

The response rate in Lithuania was high; only one out of 26 contacted interviewees refused to participate. In Sweden, about half of the press advisors and two journalists declined to be interviewed. The interviews lasted on average about 80 minutes and were recorded. The conversations were held in the respondents' native language (Lithuanian or Swedish). All interviewees were informed that they would remain anonymous and that their answers would be presented in a country context without revealing their name or workplace. Because the interviewees of this type of study are usually the most media-trained people in their countries, they were instructed that the focus of the research would be on their working practices and perceptions rather than on their names and organisations. This hopefully increased the possibility to receive honest answers.

Interviewees were asked to briefly describe their background and how they were recruited to their current position. This made it possible to identify whether any of the respondents had been engaged on the opposite side – politics and PR (for journalists) or journalism (for the sources) – which might have allowed them to create a stronger social network. The interview questions that followed concerned issues such as their daily routines at work, responsibilities, professional roles and values, where their story ideas come from (in the case of journalists), examples of different types of interaction, advantages or disadvantages related to their interactions, and perceived

changes over time. Respondents were also asked to elaborate and provide examples from their professional lives about how the trust between journalists and sources is built and how this trust can be strengthened or weakened.

The interviews were analysed using NVivo 11 Plus software for qualitative data analysis and thematic coding (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The answers were sorted thematically by coding *formal* and *informal* (some of the situations included both) aspects of communication and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of each type. The analysis indicated that aspects of *exchange* and *trust* in the interactions of the respondents are central for both journalists and sources, justifying a closer look (for example at the perceived currency in the exchange).

Usage and perceptions of formal interactions

Formal interaction with sources takes up a significant part of the journalists' daily work, especially for those working with daily news. Their work includes following the parliamentary agenda and news agencies, attending press conferences, and following other media, including politicians' social media. In these situations, sources hold the initial information and therefore potentially have more power than the journalists. Cases where the information does not immediately interest the media represent an exception. Such situations might tip the power balance over to journalists, as sources then need to fight for media attention.

Interviewees in both countries pointed to the increasing presence of press advisors in recent decades. However, the importance of these advisors in Lithuania and Sweden seems to differ.

In Sweden, professional communication coordinators seem to play a more significant role in journalist-political source relations than in Lithuania. The Swedish journalists emphasised that press advisors are active and attempt to promote certain agenda-related news angles. In Sweden, advisors suggest stories, initiate exclusive interviews with preferred media outlets, and offer individual journalists the chance to be the first to report certain news, which keeps the journalists interested in maintaining a good relationship with the press departments. On the other hand, centralised (co-ordinated from the prime minister's office) interaction sometimes prevents journalists from getting the full overview of a situation. Journalists who work in particular with news reporting in Sweden therefore expressed that they find themselves in a dependent position. Information is presented under conditions that are advantageous for the source, and news reporting is based on the schedule made by the government's communication department.

When [the government] announces the budget, it chooses the timing, media, and even the specific journalists. Instead of presenting the whole budget, it presents the budget in small bites. If you say "Yes", you promise to announce the information at

a specific time and you are subject to the conditions posed by the press advisor. It is hard to say “No”, even if some parts are less interesting, because you hope to be contacted the next time. (Swedish journalist 9)

According to Swedish journalists, this type of information management introduces a risk that journalists can become “megaphones” for well-planned governmental PR. According to our interviews, few Swedish journalists contact high-ranking politicians directly; they almost always have to go through press advisors, who then coordinate the meetings or even are present during the interviews, including some off-the-record conversations after press conferences. According to the journalists, this changes the nature of the conversation and creates a more controlled atmosphere. To prevent politicians from saying something wrong, and in cases where politicians are to reveal delicate details, press advisors might step in and warn them not to say anything more, or ask a journalist not to quote the politician (Swedish journalist 1). The politicians undergo comprehensive media training, during which press advisors carefully go through the wording of quotes for the media. A Swedish journalist illustrated this point, saying,

One day when I was to hold an interview with a politician on a live show, I happened to receive (from an anonymous source) an envelope with pre-prepared answers to all the questions that the politician’s advisors assumed I would ask during the program. (Swedish journalist 4)

In Lithuania, governmental communication is less centralised and professionalised than in Sweden. The Lithuanian journalists described press advisors as coordinators who answer media inquiries and only contact them “as much as necessary”, “when the politician in question is not available”, or when “the question is too small to disturb a minister” (Lithuanian journalist 1, Lithuanian journalist 2). Because most politicians in Lithuania answer their mobile phones, contact with a press advisor (unless it is the advisor to the prime minister or president) is considered a method largely for beginners. This creates opportunities for more personal, informal relationships between journalists and politicians. On the other hand, this type of communication is harder to coordinate. In some cases, it might even result in small scandals or mediated political fights between different ministries (or ministers) or coalition partners or inter-party fights. Lithuanian press advisors are usually present only during interviews with the highest-level political leaders (president and prime minister). In other cases, they coordinate meetings and provide the politician with the necessary background information when preparing for the interview.

Interviewees in Sweden (and to some extent in Lithuania) pointed out another aspect that has made journalists more dependent on press departments: It is harder to gain access to governmental buildings today than it was a few decades ago. Today, journalists are required to stay within defined press zones and are expected to follow the formal procedures set by the press department when contacting political sources. Moreover, government employees are advised to refer journalists to the press department so the journalists will get the “right” answers. These changes diminish the chances

of obtaining direct contact with politicians or their staff (Swedish journalist 1). Even if journalists have direct telephone numbers for their potential sources, journalists are often referred to the press department as part of the official procedure of the institution or political party in question. As stated by one interviewee, “I call the politicians’ direct mobile number, but it is a press secretary who calls me back. Some parties are extremely strict about obeying these policies” (Swedish journalist 6).

On the one hand, this practice can be understood as a part of the formalisation of journalist-source relations, where sources potentially might gain more power. On the other hand, the journalists reported that not being able to contact politicians directly increases the need to find alternative, informal sources “who would be able to talk without referring to the communication department” (Swedish journalist 6). This leads to a paradox, as the political leaders who rely on formal communication procedures may all of a sudden find themselves at a disadvantage. When journalists then use alternative sources (often political rivals or critical insiders), who remain anonymous and criticise the position of the leaders, these sources get to frame the news about what is happening while the press department is figuring out the official answer.

Exchange in formal journalist–source interaction

When it comes to formal interaction, both journalists and press advisors mostly described the journalist-source exchange in a way that corresponds to the classical literature about journalist-source relations: the source offers information in exchange for publicity. However, both sides also named several unwritten rules that are expected to be followed. These rules were the same for both Lithuania and Sweden, despite the formalisation of the communication within the Swedish government and the stronger professionalisation of both journalists and press advisors in Sweden.

First of all, the journalists found it difficult to reject stories that were offered repeatedly by a single source, as they feared that this source would then contact a competing media company the next time a good story emerged. On their side, press advisors expect journalists with whom they have friendlier relationships and who have received good stories in the past to accept less interesting news when needed (Lithuanian press advisor 4). The journalists accordingly noted that good relationships in the past can give rewards today. For example, one Swedish senior reporter thought that a good relationship with a press advisor was the reason behind an offer for an exclusive interview with a top UN officer (Swedish journalist 3).

Attending formal media events emerged as a potential way to build relationships with sources. Although most of the journalists were rather sceptical about the usefulness of press conferences (because live broadcasts and news agencies can provide the same information), they valued the opportunity to ask individual or off-the-record questions after the event, thus securing information and contacts. For example, a younger journalist reasoned that “the source will recognise me the next time I call if

I attend the press conference” (Lithuanian journalist 8). In some cases in Lithuania, journalists expressed the view that attending some “rather boring” press conferences ensured a friendlier relationship with press advisors in the future: “You attend in the hope that you will get something interesting in the future” (Lithuanian journalist 6). This shows how formal events are valued for the relationship-building aspects with the source, in general, as well as for the informal, off-the-record part after these events. In this situation, aspects of formal and informal interaction and exchange are closely interrelated.

The next section discusses how journalists and political sources use informal interactions and how they perceive the informal component of journalist–source relationships.

Usage and perceptions of informal interaction

In both Lithuania and Sweden (but also Finland and Poland) the network of “own sources” and informal interaction were described as a vital part of the journalist profession. A senior Lithuanian journalist said, “My ideas come from conversations based on trust and personal relationships. It is the core of journalism” (Lithuanian journalist 7). Informal sources can provide information off the record and outside the formal communication system. The news reporters explained that informal contacts allow them to win time and “be ready”, “be one step ahead”, or “make a correct guess”. Senior journalists, political analysts, and those working for the print media needed informal sources to provide ideas for investigations or a deeper understanding of the background – “what is really going on” (Swedish journalist 8) – especially if official information is scarce. Further highlighting this role of informal interactions, several newspaper reporters in both countries mentioned that their newsrooms made the decision to shift focus away from agenda events covered by the agencies, radio, or the online news sites to new, original angles to attract a paying audience:

Last year we changed our newsroom policies in order to provide more specialised information. We decided that reporters covering politics should avoid reporting from press conferences or other similar events since this information is available from the news agencies or our website editors. Instead, we would try to focus on providing more of our own stories, special news and investigations. One year later, I can say that it saved us time, not having to run from one press conference to another. (Swedish journalist 6)

According to the interviewees, informal sources are most important when internal conflicts within political units – parties or coalitions – take place, as well as during debates related to who should take over important positions in the government and other similar situations. The journalists reported that people who are close to the leaders of the political parties, political rivals (often within the same party), and the

second highest or middle-level public officers are the main groups of informal sources. In Lithuania, people working for institutions such as national intelligence and the courts were also named as possible informal sources when reporting on politics. In addition, informal sources were mentioned as useful for soft news or “infotainment”, for which there is a huge demand in the 24/7 news market.

One of the differences between the countries was that Lithuanian senior journalists said that they could hold conversations off the record even with the highest-level politicians (ministers and even the prime minister in some cases). On the other hand, interviewed Swedes said that the important informal sources tended to be one or a couple of levels lower, and that direct access to the highest-level politicians in Sweden was difficult.

The interviews showed that informality was important not only for journalists but for press advisors as well. A press advisor from the Swedish government said that “Maintaining good relationships with the journalists allows me to gain insight into what angles they are working on and what we could expect” (Swedish press advisor 10). In addition, press advisors expressed that close cooperation with some reporters allowed them to suggest angles or even headlines (in Sweden), “create a mutual understanding of the situation” (Lithuanian press advisor 6), or strategically leak some information (both countries).

Even though the press advisors said it was important to have an informal network of journalists, they seemed to use informality spontaneously rather than professionally. Almost none of the press advisors could mention any written or unwritten strategies for how informal relationships should be established. Nor could they name internal guidelines within their organisation regarding informal communication with the media, in order, for example, to prevent leaks in the strategically wrong moment. According to the interviews, press advisors are either unaware or unwilling to admit that some leaks take place without their knowledge. One Swedish press advisor said, “I would be very angry if I found out that someone from the ministry shared information with the media without my knowledge” (Swedish press advisor 3). At the same time, informal sources and leaks were very common in this particular organisation, according to Swedish journalists.

Nevertheless, some of the press advisors encouraged informal communication. Here, certain aspects of *formalised informality* can be noted. In Lithuania, some press advisors invite journalists to informal briefings to provide information about matters that are important for their institution. On those occasions, the entire meeting is off the record and, according to the journalists, “only the preferred journalists” are invited (Lithuanian journalist 6, 7 and 10). The topics discussed at these meetings can vary from state security and foreign policy to current internal affairs issues and do not necessarily constitute very sensitive information. Nevertheless, this practice might raise some ethical concerns because it enables the institution to indirectly set the agenda for the media without being quoted (due to the off-the-record rule) and to mediatise some preferred issues and frames. There are no rules for what issues are off

the record, in which cases issues should be discussed more publicly, which journalists should be invited to off-the-record meetings, or in what cases it would be acceptable to invite only the selected journalists. Off-the-record conversations were not as regular and routine in Sweden, although one of the Swedish press advisors mentioned that off-the-record conversations are important when it comes to some strategic issues (Swedish press advisor 11).

Despite the efforts of press advisors, informal relationships with political sources take a form that is not accessible for press advisors most of the time. Informal sources are usually political opponents who are dissatisfied with some decisions and seek contact with the media or are contacted by journalists. They simply circumvent the formal communication channels. Both politicians and journalists are interested in maintaining this informality, seemingly even more so in a context of increasing professionalisation of political communication. This observation opens up a discussion about whether a reliance on informal information equips those who act as informal sources with extra power to set the agenda for the media, leaving top political leaders and their press advisors isolated from this informal interaction and left to rely on formal means of communication.

Swedish and Lithuanian interviewees expressed similar motivations for informality, despite the organisation of the government communication in the countries being so different. The more similar the professional background of the interviewees (younger or senior journalists, working for print or broadcast/web media, or press advisors), the more similar were their answers. This demonstrates that norms regarding informality are common for professional groups and reach beyond national boundaries.

Finally, journalists were asked if they believe that the informal aspect of journalist–source interaction has changed over time. Interviewees in both countries believed that relationships between journalists and political sources have become more formal compared to 20 years ago, when journalists and politicians attended the same clubs or social events. However, the explanation for this change varied between the countries.

According to the Swedes, the change is due to fewer opportunities for face-to-face meetings at parliament because fewer journalists spend their time there as a result of increased security requirements. The need to produce more news over a shorter period of time also gives journalists less time to be present in parliament. As one Swedish journalist explained, “You cannot walk freely in the corridors, drop in on someone and ask ‘What’s up?’ the same way you could a few decades ago” (Swedish journalist 1). These examples illustrate how changes on the structural level (saving resources in the media market or security constraints) are reflected in informal interaction practices. In addition, journalists said that in situations where they contact sources by phone or SMS, a relationship already needs to have been established to get a prompt answer. “You know someone who is in the meeting, you send an SMS and get an answer before the others. But this person has to know who you are, the relationship from before is needed” (Swedish journalist 2). This becomes rarer as many press advisors today have a background in politics or professional PR rather than journalism.

In Lithuania, relationships between journalists and political sources have also changed and become more distant. The respondents attributed this to changing political and journalistic culture rather than to the emergence of professionalised political sources. More specifically, Lithuanian journalists referred to historical reasons: How the relationship between journalists and politicians changed from “fighting for common goals” (democracy, independence, market economy) during the independence period to a “watchdog vs. power” relationship during the period when independent journalism was established (Lithuanian journalist 1, Lithuanian journalist 11).

To summarise, informal interaction in journalist–source relations is primarily a way to achieve pragmatic professional goals: get the news first, find original angles, or, in the case of the political sources, get media attention.

Next, the chapter investigates the exchange in informal journalist–source interaction. Specifically, it asks whether there is a difference between formal and informal interactions in this regard.

Exchange in informal journalist-source interaction

The interviews show that the journalist-source exchange in informal relationships is driven by unwritten agreements and communication culture. The phrases “earning trust”, “long-term”, and “cultivating the relationships” were most commonly used to describe how to build a relationship with sources able to provide information informally. These phrases refer directly to the aspect of long-lasting exchange. A Swedish journalist pointed out that “It takes a long time [to earn trust] because the sources have to see how I work” (Swedish journalist 2).

The respondents further noted that one of the most important prerequisites for the exchange was that both sides belong to the same level in the hierarchy, e.g., well-established media and well-renowned politicians, or the same generation. This is confirmed by the quote below, where a younger journalist describes the purposeful work to build up a network.

The ministers are much older in age and can by no means be my informal sources, but maybe they are for somebody else [for senior journalists]. My sources’ ages are similar to mine ... I tried especially in the beginning of my career to attend after-works and parties in the hope that I would get to know some of the sources.
(Lithuanian journalist 6)

Another example, that of a politician climbing the career ladder and seeking an informal relationship with a well-established journalist who was not much older, also demonstrates the invisible boundaries in journalist-source relationships. The journalist described the situation in the following way: “The new politicians try to play like the old ones. One of them invited me for a beer more than 10 times ... This behaviour is so bizarre!” (Lithuanian journalist 5).

It is impossible to be categorical about whether informality is in the interest of journalists or sources. The interviews show that both journalists and sources, depending on the situation, can seek these types of informal interactions. For this reason, a number of Swedish respondents were hesitant to take the credit for being popular among sources or journalists. They explained that they are in demand because they work for a certain organisation (some ministries are more popular in the media than others, and some media outlets are more popular than others) and not because of their personal qualities or successful informal networks. Nonetheless, access to informal contacts equals social capital in the profession. One journalist reflected on this topic, saying this:

Sources are not motivated by ideal purposes, and they expect their views to be presented in a more favourable light ... I also think that they, as well as I and many of my journalist colleagues, think that this game is a bit exciting. It is easy to feel important: "I have a contact with the state secretary!" Or a press advisor can tell their boss: "It was me who started the spin on this matter since I know that fabulous radio host!" You try to make yourself interesting and important, and career and financial factors should not be underestimated here. (Swedish journalist 4)

The interactional pattern between journalists and informal sources has several elements that position the pattern as a middle ground between personal and professional relationships. The interviewees often called this middle ground a *professional friendship*. It has higher social demands than purely formal communication but is also characterised by certain boundaries that should not be crossed.

One of the social norms that was named in the interviews was that journalists and press advisors contact each other even in situations "when we do not need anything in particular, just to check what is up" (Lithuanian journalist 6), so as not to be the one who only calls when they need something. Both journalists and press advisors also mentioned that informal cooperation is only possible when there is mutual "chemistry", both on a social level and when it comes to values. A senior journalist illustrated the point with the following observation:

We met A and B [names politicians from traditional parties], but it would be weird to play tennis or go for a beer with C [from the party considered to be populist], even though C kept asking. I [lied] and said that it was not me who was sending the invitation. (Lithuanian journalist 5)

This indicates that journalists' political views or perceptions about which politicians are serious play a role when it comes to informality (just like they would in any other social relationship). It also emphasises that journalists have the power to choose with whom to socialise and interact. The same is true for political sources and press advisors – although they are obliged to formally provide equal access to information for all media; Lithuanian respondents in particular mentioned that "serious" journalists or those who "did a good job in the past" would be remembered first when something turns up (Lithuanian press advisor 4 and Lithuanian politician 1).

On the other hand, getting too close to each other was perceived to be a risk; the relationships should not extend into the private sphere. The journalists in Sweden declared that they purposely avoid becoming personal friends with their political sources. A typical answer in Sweden was, "I can eat an alcohol-free lunch with a source, but then it is paid by my newsroom" (Swedish journalist 3). Lithuanian journalists too thought personal relationships might become a disadvantage, as described by the following comment: "Say that your friend, who is a politician, tells an interesting story during a party, but says that "this is not for the record" – then you lose a topic and soon cannot write about anything" (Lithuanian journalist 6).

In many cases, the interviewees thought that personal relationships that cross the boundaries into *professional friendship* could become a limitation at work. To avoid such dilemmas and conflicting interests, journalists in both Lithuania and Sweden said that topics that would reflect negatively on their informal sources should be analysed by other colleagues in the newsroom (Lithuanian journalist 1).

Even though the journalists talked about their access to the source network with pride, they were also eager to emphasise the boundaries, risks, and ethical considerations of such relationships. This indicates that informal communication has somewhat of a negative connotation for the interviewees (especially journalists). This might partly be related to professional culture, for example the challenges of remaining autonomous and objective while maintaining access to the sources. It might also indicate that the exchange between journalists and informal sources is more complex than simply "information for publicity" and that some compromises are made along the way. In some cases, journalists did seem to overstep the boundaries of their traditional professional role in order to be perceived as trustworthy. For example, journalists sometimes advised the source to stay anonymous or agreed to leave some facts out of the story. An example brought up by a younger reporter illustrates this point.

If you are friends with somebody, they could always ask you 'Can you please leave this fact out of the story?' Maybe some tiny fact. Often it is important for the source to stay anonymous, or the story with that fact mentioned would look even more scandalous, etc. I take these wishes into account. (Lithuanian journalist 6)

In this example, the exchange involved *information in exchange for silence*.

In some cases, important anonymous sources might look at the final copy of the story to make sure the details are correct. Sometimes journalists even discuss the timing for when certain information could be announced with the source, as indicated by this comment:

The sources cannot state the conditions, but it is often in my interest to discuss how they should be presented or whether they would like to stay anonymous. I want to maintain my sources. Sometimes, we agree about when the news can be broadcasted. The sources can ask us to wait one day, and I can ask how many [other newsrooms] know that information. If it is many, then I am in a hurry. If it is only me, then I can wait. So, we coordinate a bit. (Swedish journalist 4)

These answers expand the conventional understanding of journalist-source relations. They illustrate that the interaction is complex and that journalists in some cases act as advisors (“I see that it would be risky for the source to be mentioned in this context” (Lithuanian journalist 1)) for their political sources. In extension, journalists might become a part of the political process by opening doors to potential publicity or offering sources a chance to set the agenda indirectly while maintaining anonymity. On the other hand, the power of whether the story will be published at all is always in the hands of journalists and their newsroom, and the sources providing the information must accept this (Swedish journalist 4).

Another aspect of informal relationships is who gets the story or the information. Both Swedish and Lithuanian press advisors admitted that journalists who demonstrated knowledge and interest in the subject and “who report correctly” could expect more exclusive angles or story suggestions on some occasions.

Usually it is an unwritten agreement, when I [the press advisor] have something exclusive and special and give it to you and not to some other journalists. Of course, if it is a big issue, we hold a press conference. But some news is better suited for radio and not TV, for example. So, I suggest it to the journalist who keeps in touch, who has helped ... The news might be about my own institution, but I might even advise them to look into some other subject that I know of since I know a lot about what is happening within the government. (Lithuanian press advisor 4)

A journalist confirmed that breaking the unwritten rules in this exchange can result in lost trust between journalists and sources: “I assume with time [the sources] learn who to contact [with information], so that it works out as [the source] intended” (Swedish journalist 4). One of the usual fears regarding informal journalist-source relations is that journalists will be less objective when reporting about politicians who also act as important sources. In this study, the interviewed journalists hardly admitted this risk. According to them, in terms of the relationships with the sources, it did not matter whether or not the story was critical as long as it was well grounded in facts. “The source understands that it is my job [to be critical]” is a typical quote attributed to the journalists in both Sweden and Lithuania. On the other hand, press advisors said that journalists who lose trust “rely on the wrong sources” or “use information in the wrong context” (Swedish press advisor 10):

Once we provided very good information to a journalist, but the journalist afterwards relied on the wrong sources and the story was incorrect. I have not had any contact with this journalist ever since. (Swedish press advisor 10)

This attitude illustrates that sources place certain expectations on journalists and the behavioural norms and compromises that could be anticipated in the exchange between journalists and sources. For example, some of the journalists in Lithuania felt that they were not welcome at the informal meetings organised by the president’s office because they had reported critically or used information they heard during the

informal briefings in the past: “I think I am not welcome there now. I did not get an invitation and I feel that [my critical reporting] is the reason.” (Lithuanian journalist 6). Journalists might find it difficult to name any such compromises, especially as some might conflict with their own professional values and normative ideals of the objective, autonomous journalist. However, the feeling that critical reporting might conflict with future opportunities to access information (especially informal) illustrates the norms and challenges in journalist-source relations. These unwritten, often not even articulated, norms and perceptions of each other’s expectations can influence work. For example, a journalist might fear that some actions (such as a critical article) will let the source down and limit future access.

Another risk with journalists relying on informality is that few journalists in either of the countries had an equally good network of sources across the entire spectrum of political parties. This might be a result of the earlier described tendencies of homophily and aspects of personal preferences. Although political parallelism is not strong in Lithuania and Sweden, the asymmetry indicates that “mainstream” parties have better contact with “mainstream” media. It turns out that the parties most difficult to access are those that are perceived to be somewhat radical or populist. Yet this access could be important, as noted by one Swedish journalist:

When reporting on somewhat closed organisations, like a radical-right political party, informal contacts in that party are especially important because the official channels in the party would not let you know what really is going on. (Swedish journalist 3)

The Lithuanian interviews communicated a clear division between media that perceives itself to be “mainstream” and media that, despite high circulation, is sometimes described as “marginal”. The journalists from the media outlet that others called “marginal” reported that they lack contacts in some of the mainstream parties. In contrast, they had informal contacts in one of the parties that was often considered by the rest of the Lithuanian interviewees (Lithuanian journalist 9, Lithuanian journalist 10) to be hard to access. The fact that different media rely on different groups of informal sources could present a risk to the objectivity of the media, as the available source network might influence news selection.

Conclusions

This chapter analyses the exchange between journalists and their political sources to understand how these processes differ depending on whether the form of interaction is formal or informal. It has looked deeper into the journalists’ and governmental press advisors’ use of both formal and informal interaction, keeping in mind that professionalisation of political communication could be an influential factor. Professionalisation could make relationships more formal, and thus give more power to

professional communication staff, or, on the contrary, open the door to alternative, informal sources.

The analysis shows that the processes of professionalising government communication and the demand for informal communication alternatives are interrelated. To understand the power and exchange in journalist-source relationships, both interaction levels (formal and informal) need to be considered. Journalists and sources exist in a co-created, reflexive professional culture. This study demonstrates that changes on the formal level of communication (like an increased control and professionalisation) inspire reactions on the informal level (such as a resistance to use formal communication channels or an increasing demand for informality). As a result, investments in professionalised political communication do not necessarily grant the most power to political leaders served by communication departments, often isolated from informal access to journalists. Such investments can even be counterproductive: the more the government attempts to control and coordinate communication, the greater the need among both journalists and politicians (or other political sources) to go around the official communication system and use informal sources.

Having access to a variety of informal sources is a professional strength and power for journalists in both Lithuania and Sweden, especially when it comes to getting ideas for non-agenda stories or investigative stories that require deeper research. However, it is often challenging to build up a network of sources that is equally well connected to different political parties and organisations. In both countries, journalists described some political parties or organisations as harder to access than others.

The results also show that political sources' ability to gain power from the interaction with journalists depends not only on the type of source (e.g., if the source is an elite source) or the stage of the news production. The gains also depend on whether the access and interaction with the journalist is formal or informal. The type of interaction therefore needs to be considered when analysing power and exchange in journalist-source relationships. The type of interaction (formal/informal) could potentially be an important attribute for future research in journalist-source relations when evaluating why and how certain sources became important in specific situations. The same journalists or sources might be rather powerful in one situation and less influential in another, depending on the type of communication tactics they apply. Studies that don't take this into account might overestimate the power of one side in journalist-source relations.

To sum up, the study reaches the following conclusions:

- The exchange process on the informal level exceeds the boundaries of “information in exchange for publicity”.

In both Lithuania and Sweden, having informal access is considered to be a vital part of the profession and of social capital, especially among journalists. However, such access requires long-term engagement; cooperation in the past is important for relationships in the future. The interaction often occurs on a regular basis, and in situations

outside the actual story production. Informal interaction between journalists and their sources can thus be described as a middle ground between purely professional and purely personal relationships. Social preferences and experiences in the past play a role when choosing which sources/journalists can be trusted. This highlights how the informal relationships exchange is complex and goes beyond the traditional definitions of professional roles. It expands the understanding of journalist–source relations as “information in exchange for publicity”. In informal relationships, journalists are not only offering anonymity and possible publicity, but they also take on the role of advisor, both for communication purposes and more in general, to maintain a good relationship with their political sources. This means that some journalists are not only watchdogs but also actors in the political arena. In this exchange, journalists have power over the sources because sources are never guaranteed that the information they provide will be used in the way they intended. In other words, the sources are always taking a risk. On the other hand, journalists are aware of the sources’ expectations, and these expectations, both openly declared or only perceived, play a role in the journalistic decision making.

Theoretically, based on this research, journalists’ power and ability to remain autonomous and objective depends on 1) the strength of and support from their media organisation, which needs to prioritise journalistic integrity over financial pressures and temporary success; this factor would make journalists more resistant to the pressures they experience from the sources; and 2) journalists’ ability to have access to as evenly distributed a social network of informal sources as possible, where voices from different political parties are equally heard. The latter is hard to achieve in practice because the informal cooperation between journalists and sources often requires that they belong to the same generation and hierarchies in the political and media landscape and even share personal preferences.

- Formal interaction is beneficial for professionalised communicators in agenda-based news.

Political communication has successfully adapted to the changing media environment, potentially giving more power to professional political sources, in particular when it comes to formal interaction and agenda-based news reporting. This trend is especially distinct in Sweden, where the political communication is somewhat more developed and centralised than in Lithuania. Professional sources offering information exclusively to their chosen media outlet succeed in making agreements that information will be published via a specific media format at a specific time. This intrudes not only on the instigation of news but also into later phases of news production. The currency of the exchange in these relations corresponds to descriptions in the classical literature on journalist–source relations: “information for publicity.”

- In non-agenda-based news, informal interaction is more beneficial than formal interaction for both sides.

Both journalists and the sources prefer informal interaction when it comes to long-lasting processes and deeper investigations, as well as relatively small news, like daily political scandals or fights for certain positions in a party. Sources who act informally seem to gain a significant advantage over formal sources when it comes to leaks and unscheduled news. Those who provide information informally (who, as a rule with some exceptions, do not belong to or coordinate with communication departments) remain invisible to the public and, in many cases, their own political organisations. Nonetheless, journalists tend to rely on them heavily wherefore these sources potentially gain significant power over formal sources in the public sphere.

This chapter also shows that press advisors, despite their knowledge of how important informal communication channels are, seldom succeed in using these channels for their own purposes. Attempts of *formalised informality* during off-the-record meetings are noteworthy exceptions. Such informality allows them to claim some parts of the political agenda without being directly mentioned in the media. This type of interaction therefore deserves separate ethical considerations. On the other hand, if professional communication departments would ignore or fail to find a way to join the informal conversations with journalists, political leaders and their press advisors might find themselves in a rather isolated position.

Last but not least, the chapter discusses whether informal interaction is more culturally bound than formal interaction. The differences between the two analysed countries seem to be smaller than expected. Journalists and sources in both Lithuania and Sweden have developed similar informal codes of conduct when it comes to working with sources and informal interaction with them. This suggests common, transnational trends for the profession in a broad sense. Further investigation is required (for example, reconstruction or ethnological studies of the news production) to verify how the perceptions of formality/informality are reflected in the daily work.

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