

Locked in a mutual dependency

Media and the political executive in close interplay

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The focus of this anthology has been the relationship between political journalists and their sources in government. The results from this three-year project show the many dimensions, contradictions, and uncertainties of the relationship. Both sides need each other in their daily work, but there are also conflicting interests in the struggle for control of information flows. Both sides need close and personal relationships, but also distance and a division of roles.

Journalists and sources perform a daily trade of information in exchange for publicity – a daily negotiation based on power and personal contacts. The rules governing this trade are written by media logics, and both parts know these rules and use them for their own purposes. The negotiations are mostly hidden, but their results are visible in the public image of government politics and the control of information flows in politics.

This anthology lists many examples of this daily exchange between political journalists and the political machinery in government. In this final chapter, we summarise some of the results from the four countries: Finland, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden. We also offer some preliminary answers to our questions for this research project:

- How can the relationship between political journalists and their sources be described? Is it mutually reinforcing and symbiotic or more fundamentally adversarial?
- What are journalists and political sources actually doing in their daily work? What means and methods are they using to control the flow of information? What are the differences between exchanges in formal and informal settings?
- What trends are common in different kinds of media systems, and what differences can be traced to political cultures and history? How are the relationships between the political system and the media changing – are they becoming closer or more distant? Or perhaps both?

- What are the implications for modern democracy and its institutions? In other words, what are the implications with regard to transparency, accountability, legitimacy, and power relationships in the political process?

The analysis is based on theories outlined in earlier chapters: the exchange model, the mediatisation of politics, the centralisation of executive power, and theories from comparative media research. In this book, we critically examine how these theories fit when analysing the changing political communication.

Summary of the empirical findings

While existing research is rich in descriptions of the relationships between the media and politics, most research adopts a systemic approach and a single-country analysis. In this volume, we have identified and assessed patterns of interaction within as well as across countries.

The findings are based mainly on extensive qualitative interview data and supplemented by documentary evidence. Altogether, more than 80 face-to-face interviews were conducted with political journalists and government media/political advisors, press secretaries, and politicians. Based on these interviews, we described the roles of both sides and the trends that are visible. We established that there is an ongoing professionalisation of both the practices and interactive modes of both sides but also that the degree of professionalisation differs between the countries. Below, we highlight the principal results.

Finland: A mutual interdependence

In Chapter 2, Risto Niemikari, Tapio Raunio, and Tom Moring focused on the relationships between the political executive and the media in Finland. The authors concluded that these relationships characteristically feature a system of interdependence between politicians and journalists, where journalists rely on politicians for information and politicians, in turn, rely on journalists for publicity. A high degree of access to political sources is described as a distinct feature of the Finnish system. Alongside this openness operates a culture of informal interaction, as the management of pre-public information is crucial for politicians, journalists, and civil servants.

Relationships between the journalists and political sources are generally good, with both sides describing a shift towards more professional and ethical conduct. However, occasional antagonisms do arise, with each PM having phases of poor media relations at some point. While social media is widely used and helps politicians bypass the traditional media, social media is still less important than legacy media.

One specific subject deserving closer examination is the role of political advisors. They hold a central role, while civil servant media staffers seek to maintain a neutral position. The importance of political advisors is also related to the centralisation of

government communication, which at least partly appears to be driven by increasing use of horizontal policy packages and ideological heterogeneity (Finnish multi-party cabinets typically bring together parties that have quite different preferences).

Journalists tend to follow the PMO and certain key ministries (such as finance and foreign affairs) far more closely than they follow other groups; in essence, they follow the most important sources.

Amidst all these changes, both in the media system and inside the government, the interviews clearly show that journalism still counts. Old habits die hard, with MPs, ministers, and journalists still regularly interacting face to face. Informality is strongly present. Nonetheless, as news is delivered through various channels, more or less direct from the source, journalists may find their future role to be more as pundits or interpreters of political affairs. Such tendencies can already be observed. A consequence of this may be an elitisation of political journalism in the future, where the most prominent political journalists become more like experts, providing coverage to a circle of politically interested citizens. Moreover, with growing distance between the two professional groups and relationships between politicians and journalists becoming increasingly formal, the inner tensions for those who perform duties between the two groups are likely to grow.

Lithuania: Informal social networks and power relations

In Chapter 3, Auksė Balčytienė and Milda Malling discussed how the media and political information sources in Lithuania are navigating change – how they adjust their needs-oriented behaviour to changing conditions. Even though the media and political sources gain power in different situations, both sides function in reciprocal interdependence. Formal contacts are quite consistent and professionalised, but these contacts continue to work in the shadow of informal social networks, which create their own power relations, dynamics, and hierarchical structures.

In Lithuania, having access to politicians of the highest rank appears to be quite common. This is attributed not only to the smallness of the country, and hence interpersonal closeness, but also to other characteristics such as politics tailored to personal interests, which also sets the stage for informal linkages.

The unusual proximity between journalists and politicians can also be traced back to the situation in the 1990s. At the time of the transition to independence, journalists and politicians were fighting for common goals, with the result of there being many personal friendships and connections. Cultural legacies tend to persist and shape how power structures are formed and maintained in a country. In Lithuania, there are situations in which each side seeks to go around the official communication system, stepping outside their anticipated role and opening up for new forms of informality. While such findings are contextually shaped, the views regarding the interaction indicate broader trends of professionalisation, which have also been identified in other cultures and political conditions.

In Lithuania, the media and politics are evolving into fields that are cooperatively formed and close but at the same time also highly safeguarded (and on the side of the media, professionally skilled). The official communication between the two sides is friendly and appears to be honest; yet at the same time it is careful, fairly suspicious, and on occasion quite tense and even sceptical. Overall, it is sustained and regulated by needs-oriented performance.

In contrast to previous research, this analysis paints a somewhat different picture and suggests that both the media and politics are evolving and function in close interconnectedness, and each side (to a varying degree) is inclined to professionalise and protect its own occupational logic and ideology. Hence, Lithuania, too, displays both closeness and distance in the relationship between media and politics.

Poland: Structures remain despite political change

In Chapter 4, Bogusława Dobek-Ostrowska and Jacek Nożewski discussed how political executive–media relations are shaped by cultural and historical legacies (in a post-communist Polish context). In Poland, recent political changes have had a major impact and restructured the relationships among journalists, press secretaries, and politicians. Yet within these structures, very much remains the same. Journalists have (largely) avoided political pressure and maintain their previous ways of obtaining information from their sources.

Whereas the analysis stresses the interdependence that underlies the relation, the interviews also reveal an invisible conflict: press secretaries are often used as “shields” for politicians. Both the journalists and their sources seek to maintain their contacts, especially the informal ones, but they also try to keep a certain distance. Another important finding concerns social media, which is widely used for self-presentation in Poland, with both the politicians and the media using these platforms (especially Facebook and Twitter).

It is striking how stable the political communication system appears to be. While there have been many changes in the media following the country’s recent and dramatic political change, journalists have not observed any limitations on their access to sources. However, one area where the political changes have had an impact is routines. In the chapter, Dobek-Ostrowska and Nożewski also discussed how the communication staff, including the spokespeople, is undergoing a process of politicisation.

The chapter makes the claim that the prime minister plays the main role in the communication process of the government, followed by political advisors and, finally, civil servants. Overall, the Polish case study reveals both how close and how distant the media and the politicians may be from each other.

Sweden: A professional symbiosis

In Chapter 5, Karl Magnus Johansson, Milda Malling and Gunnar Nygren similarly discussed a complex pattern of interaction, an exchange that is best described as interdependency. Journalist–source relationships were described as professionally symbiotic; exchanges are close but with recognition of each other’s professional roles at the heart of the relationship.

The analysis establishes the routinisation at work, as well as the professionalisation. The authors described a shared political communication culture based on norms, values, and attitudes of the actors. Within this culture, there is a daily struggle for the control of information flows. There are daily negotiations on what is newsworthy, what should be published, and what should not. It is difficult to say which side is the strongest, but political sources do have a large influence on the agenda by controlling the information.

The study also discussed the active efforts from sources to influence how news is framed, using both soft and hard methods. Clearly, the political side is not a victim of media logic; on the contrary, it uses this logic for its own objectives.

Both the sources and the journalists described increasing resources on the political side. At the same time, actors on both sides told the same story about downsized newsrooms, journalists who are less specialised and have less knowledge for evaluating information, higher demands to produce content for different platforms, and less time for journalistic research. Taken together, the result of this development is political communication that is increasingly influenced by the political actors. By adapting to media logic, the political actors increase their influence on political reporting at the expense of the autonomy of professional journalism. To some extent, this means a return to political parallelism. While it is not the old version of political parallelism, it is a modern type of political instrumentalisation through the back door.

A changing balance of power?

Results from the four countries support the basic exchange model explaining the relationship between journalists and political sources (Berkowitz, 2009; Hall et al., 1978; Manning, 2001). This relationship is simultaneously adversarial and symbiotic. Both groups of actors struggle to control the flow of information, but they also need each other in their daily work; information is exchanged for publicity and space in the public sphere.

This trade occurs within a shared culture created in the daily interaction between journalists and their political sources, a culture binding the parts together in ongoing negotiations (Pfetsch, 2014). It can also be described as an interpretative community filled with a tacit understanding about its rules and norms. In this community, interaction is governed by values developed from normative departures about the role of

the media in society. Over time, these values have become internalised in the patterns of interaction that structure the system.

In this professional political communication culture, the borders between the actors have become increasingly blurred. Actors jump between jobs on each side, from newsrooms to government PR consultants and then back to journalism (Falkheimer, 2012). From a media content perspective, content marketing and other new commercial features are mixed with journalism, making it increasingly difficult to evaluate trustworthiness (e.g., whether political news is produced by journalists or political actors; whether the news is verified or simply a political statement).

The balance of power between the actors is not established at a single point in time, but evolves with the media development and policies of the political executive. Notably, in all four countries, there has been an increase in governmental resources and efforts to influence the public agenda and the public image of politics (see Chapter 6). This coincides with an increasing centralisation of government communication. The level of this kind of news management differs among the four countries: While centralisation is prominent in Finland and Sweden, a development towards more central coordination and control is less visible in Lithuania and Poland. Hence the extent to which government communication is centralised varies, and the variation is patterned and clustered. The findings suggest that previous research, which focused heavily on Western states, underestimates cross-national variation in government communication.

By the strategic use of new digital platforms, technological developments have given political actors new possibilities to bypass the traditional media and create the public images that they prefer (see Chapter 7). There is evidence of a pattern here. While Facebook serves as a top-down channel for personal branding and dissemination of information, Twitter provides informational exchange with professional elites, including media elites. Moreover, while press staffers are rather marginalised in the Finnish and Polish networks, they are very integrated in the Swedish network. In conclusion, government communication in social media appears to be hybrid; it is based on a synergy of top-down and horizontal models of communication, mass media and social media/network media logics, and both traditional and new-media practices.

On the media side, political journalism faces decreasing resources in the newsrooms. There are fewer journalists developing their own networks of sources, and those still covering politics have to produce more for multiple platforms. This weakens the position of journalism in relation to the growing staff of communicators within the political machinery.

While the trend is the same in all four countries, the strength of the change differs. However, as the influence of professional journalism decreases, powerful sources will be increasingly able to influence and shape the public image of government politics.

Daily interaction and informality

The second group of questions concerned the daily interaction between political journalists and sources within the government. Interviews in all four countries showed many examples of this interaction, formal and public as well as informal and hidden. In this interaction, both mutual interests and conflicts are expressed in the daily negotiations between journalists and sources.

In the first chapter of this book, a four-square matrix was presented to explain the different dimensions of interaction. The dimensions captured whether the interaction is, on the one hand, adversarial or symbiotic and, on the other hand, whether it is public or hidden. The utility of this matrix was confirmed in all four countries, and it was shown that the form of interaction matters for the exchange and its trust and balance of power between the actors. An overall finding was that different groups of sources gain power in different situations. Formal situations and agenda-based news are advantageous for professional sources; informal sources gain power over formal sources during political conflicts and in relation to non-agenda news. In the cases of informal journalist–source interaction, journalists are sometimes not only offering anonymity and publicity; to maintain good relationships with their sources they sometimes also take on the role of advisor (see Chapter 8; cf. Davis, 2009, 2010).

Instead of serving as watchdogs, journalists in this way become actors in the political arena. That the type of interaction influences the content of exchange and the balance of power are findings that call for the reconsideration of existing theories on interdependency.

Mediatisation and control of information flows

In prior research, mediatisation has been conceived as a slow and gradual change. It is not a question of media effects but of how society in general adapts to the logics of the media. With regard to politics, it is defined as a long-term process through which the importance of the media on political processes, institutions, organisations, and actors has increased (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014; Mazzoleni & Schultz, 1999).

Theories on the mediatisation of politics are based on the assumption that some kind of political logic within political institutions and processes is increasingly replaced by media logic (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). A closer look at the two logics, however, shows that there are some major problems; they are not mutually exclusive and can rather be described as “overlapping” (Marcinkowski, 2014; Van Aelst et al., 2014). While the empirical results from the four countries show that the political system has adapted to media logic, the consequence of this is not a transfer of power from political institutions to media institutions (see Chapter 9). Instead, professionalised government communication has incorporated the rules of media logic and learned how to play the game with the media.

Indeed, combining downsized, commercial media outlets with increasingly resource-strong and professional government communication, an interpretation emerges that differs from the more common one. By transforming the political system and integrating media logic into political processes, a new kind of political instrumentalisation has arisen. From a political perspective, this brings the analysis close to the functional analysis (cf. Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2017). Here the key question is not whether the media has gained power in relation to politics, but how the political system uses the media for political purposes, i.e., to achieve political goals.

In the old top-down media system, political power tried to control information flows by hard methods, like ownership, censorship, and legal means. In the four countries in our study, political power is still trying to control information flows but now by using soft tools, like news management, spin doctors, informal personal networks, and the bypassing of traditional media.

Political journalism in a comparative perspective

The third group of questions concerns the comparative perspective: Similarities and differences among the countries that were examined. According to Kuhn and Kleis Nielsen (2014), political journalism is characterised by both continuity and change. While media development and social change influence the conditions, political journalism is still based in different media systems with various kinds of relations between politics and media.

One of four key variables in the model for analysing media systems created by Hallin and Mancini (2004) is the degree of political parallelism. This is defined as structural ties between media and political organisations – the political affiliation of journalists, owners, and media managers; media content; and news consumption patterns. Many of the results in this anthology concern the first part of the definition – the structural relationships and political affiliations of the media (see Chapter 10). The presented results show both differences and similarities among the four countries.

In all four countries, the journalist–source relationship is professionally maintained. There are, however, clear differences between, on the one side, Poland and Lithuania, and, on the other side, Sweden and Finland. In Poland and Lithuania, there is a recent history of a common struggle for democracy, and in this struggle the two groups worked closely together. Due to this, there are still close relationships between the groups, and nearly all press advisors in the government have a background in the media. Moreover, the partisan tradition is still strong among journalists, and many are expected to pick sides in daily politics. In contrast to this, in Sweden and Finland there is a long history of professionalisation among journalists and less fluid borders between the professions. Despite this, there are examples of mixing journalistic and political careers also in these countries.

In all four countries, there is a professionalisation of government communication (see Chapter 6). The development includes an element of centralisation of control over government communication and the adoption of sophisticated strategies for news management. However, while the trend is common to all four countries, there are differences regarding its intensity and degree. In Sweden, centralised news management has been crucial for all governments since 2006, and the size of this communication structure has grown steadily. The government in Finland also has strong communication structures, even if the politically appointed part is less dominant. In Poland and Lithuania, these trends are visible, but they are not as strong as in the other two countries. Instead, old and informal paths for communication are important, and in a small country like Lithuania, personal contacts are especially important.

When it comes to the organisational connections between politics and the media, the patterns are contradictory. In Poland and, to some extent, Finland, the political sphere uses or tries to use its influence on public service broadcasting. Polish newspapers are also clearly politically affiliated, while in Lithuania they are more connected to commercial interests. In Sweden, finally, political influence is not observed directly, but the journalists talk about higher demands on news production and a dependency on “information subsidies” from political sources. Instead of direct control, the provision of political information becomes the principal means to supervise and control the public agenda (see Chapter 10).

Two dimensions of the relationships between political journalists and their sources are analysed in Chapter 10: the mode of political institutional logic and the mode of media professional logic. The results show Sweden and Finland close to each other in a pluralistic corporatist political logic. When it comes to media logics, though, a comparison between Finnish and Swedish journalists shows that Finnish journalists pursue more of an advocacy ideal, whereas Swedish journalists have adopted a watchdog ideal. In comparison, the relationships in Poland and Lithuania are more influenced by a restrictive political logic, in Poland controlled by central political agents and in Lithuania by different clientelist interests. Also, there are clear differences between the two countries with regard to journalism: In Poland, journalism is to a great extent instrumentalised by politics, whereas Lithuanian journalism is more adversarial and in the interests of owners and others.

The conclusion of this analysis is that contextual circumstances such as historical legacy and political culture are still of high significance in shaping the relationships between journalists and their sources. There are strong factors of change in all four countries (e.g., development of ICT and journalists’ increasing dependence on online sources), and both economic demands and multi-platform production have changed the conditions for journalists’ daily work. The results of these changes, though, still differ depending on the political culture legacy.

The same conclusions are made by Hallin and Mancini (2017) in an analysis 10 years after the publication of “Comparing Media Systems”. While in 2004 they predicted a convergence towards the liberal model, 10 years later they conclude that “differences

among national media systems are in important ways quite resilient” (Hallin & Mancini, 2017: 162). Other research has confirmed patterns of difference among media systems, and Hallin and Mancini conclude that it is time to abandon the view that national differences will disappear. The same conclusion is reached from the analysis of the four countries in this book.

In the book, we have also discussed the development towards a new kind of political instrumentalisation of the media. Whereas the old type of political parallelism was based on party press and external pluralism, with media outlets representing different political actors/parties, the new kind is largely hidden and the result of political professionalisation and centralisation. Resources in government communication have increased, and government communication has over time become more centralised and advanced. At the same time, political journalists are struggling to cope with rising demands, not least stemming from multi-platform production and fewer journalists in the newsrooms.

This trend is perhaps most visible in the two Nordic countries, but it is present in all four countries.

What are the consequences for democracy?

The last group of questions concerns the implications for modern democracy and its institutions. In normative theories of the division of power in liberal democracies, the media independently scrutinises power and creates a public sphere for deliberative public debate (Christians et al., 2009; Dahl, 1989). In this theoretical model, there is a clear division between the role of the media and the roles of the political system. This division is fundamental for the role of journalism in Western democracies, as formulated by Kovach and Rosenstiel in “The Elements of Journalism” (2007: 17): “The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing”. To achieve this, journalism has to be independent from those it covers and serve as independent watchdogs of power. To fulfil this task, journalists’ first loyalty must be to the citizens and their first obligation to the truth; the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification.

However, ideal models are seldom reflected in existing societies. Reality is much more complicated, with many power relationships, both visible and invisible. Moreover, political resources are not distributed equally. Liberal democracy has an elitist character, with elites in leadership positions. Our results show a close interdependency between political journalists and their sources; both groups are parts of the same elite.

Our findings raise an important normative issue: Is it good or bad that the media and political elites interact through interdependent relations? Rather than offering an answer, we outline the alternatives. The traditional interpretation in research is to regret elite collusion effects from a democratic perspective. If opinions and values of the citizenry on policies, politicians, and institutions can be easily manipulated by

elites to serve their interests, this is bad news for democratic politics. This concern is echoed in theories of democracy that emphasise the importance of bottom-up processes of preference formation and representation as well as accountability and participation and deliberation.

The professionalisation of political communication has consequences. Observing that communicative functions of political systems have increasingly become the domain brief of professionals, notably spin doctors, Hamelink (2007: 179) asks what happens to the political process and what the consequences are “for the democratic quality of the polity”. Hamelink sees a tendency towards “the centralisation of communication activities in both government and political parties ... and the growth of cynicism among citizens” (2007: 180), and suggests that the development reinforces the “elitist” element of liberal democracy, turning it into a “thin democracy” (2007: 185).

This concern with democratic consequences is reinforced when populist politicians accuse the media of being part of the establishment; traditional politics and the media are treated as part of the same old structure that populists want to overthrow. At the same time, these populist movements use the media and its logics to present themselves as “outsiders”.

In parallel, however, elite communication and public contestation are natural and necessary components of the process through which individuals develop political attitudes. Forming an opinion involves assessing, accepting, and rejecting competing frames communicated in the public realm. This perspective is reflected in theories privileging elite competition as a normal component of democratic rule.

From a mediatisation perspective, political actors have to adapt to their communication environment and the rules of the game set by the media. In the 1960s, television changed the rules of political communication when politicians could communicate directly with voters in their living rooms. Today, social media is again changing communication, making it possible for political actors to bypass newsrooms and journalists to communicate directly with citizens. A new elite, an elite with communication skills, is replacing the campaign worker and the party bureaucrat (Manin, 1997). These mediatisation effects present challenges to democracy.

A group that clearly belongs to the new political elite is the group of so-called “policy professionals” (Garsten et al., 2015; Svallfors, 2017). Their services have become increasingly important, and as they control information and assist elected politicians, members of the group have also gained power in political processes. This brings us to the changes within political systems.

Research on the presidentialisation of politics in parliamentary systems has addressed the ways in which the political chief executive has been empowered in a broad set of countries. The explanations advanced emphasise a range of contingent and structural factors, best conceived of as complementary. Accounts that centre on the “logic of modern mass media” or the “changing structure of mass communication” (Poguntke & Webb, 2005) stress the extent to which the media, especially television, nurture a focus on personalities (e.g., Karvonen, 2010; Krauss & Nyblade, 2005;

Mughan, 2000). This development is claimed to benefit chief executives, who become natural foci of media coverage and often reinforce this development themselves by cultivating personal images tailored for modern media. Thus, political leaders themselves are an active part in this development.

We share important analytical affinities with accounts that privilege the media or communication as a source of chief executive empowerment. Yet we are dissatisfied with the existing status of this explanation for two reasons. First, there is a strong tendency in existing research to refer broadly to the media or mediatisation without specifying in detail what it is about this process that empowers chief executives at the expense of other actors. Second, where accounts offer such specifications, they centre primarily on personalisation effects of the media. Yet, as we argue, the contribution of the media to chief executive empowerment goes further than that. The media pressure requires chief executives to possess independent resources. Most importantly, it extends to long-term institutional changes. Through our focus on political executive–media relations, our results endorse the notion that the media serves to redistribute power among political actors in favour of political leaders and their aides at the heart of power. It is here that the literature on presidentialisation, along with research on the professionalisation of political communication, helps us to better understand what is going on in modern government and in the interplay between the media and the political executive.

The tendency towards a strengthening of the executive centre has important consequences for democracy as we know it. The criteria for a vibrant democratic process include the media and its role in promoting open government and holding governors accountable. It is a matter of discussion whether strong professionalised political sources contribute to openness or whether the changing power relation instead leads to increased secrecy and government hush-hush.

An area demanding further studies

This volume has explored the question of how and with what consequences political executives and the media interact. In particular, we have examined the relationship from an exchange perspective. The volume describes a relationship between the media and political executives that strongly affects both groups and where professionals, we argue, are in a kind of working relationship with one another. Various kinds of media have become a fixture among political executives. It seems that no government is immune to the media. This in itself justifies a close look at the politics–media relationship to further the development of research on the media and politics in its broadest sense. In conclusion, the study of the interplay between the media and the political executive offers a wide range of challenges to researchers. It also covers a crucial part of liberal Western democracy: the idea of power division and independent media as a fourth estate in society. We bring this book to a close with a plea for more interdisciplinary and comparative research in this area.

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