SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT
Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 2013-0019
Project manager: Karl Magnus Johansson, until end of March 2021 professor and since May 2021 affiliate professor of political science at Södertörn University
Project title: *Symbiotic leader-media relations? Exploring interaction between prime ministers and the media in Finland, Lithuania, Poland and Sweden*

1. Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project is to explore leader–media relations, more specifically interactions between prime ministers (and their communication aides) and journalists, between journalists and political sources, in the four selected countries and in a comparative perspective. It starts from the assumption that these relations are mutually reinforcing and "symbiotic" rather than more fundamentally adversarial, that political executives and media are closely linked and explores in what ways. It is guided by the overarching question of how and with what consequences political executives and media interact. This key question has both empirical and normative orientations and these are related. It involves an ambition to both explore the relationships and to address actual and potential consequences for political power and for democracy as we know it.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

The central results are three-fold. First, the empirical data from the four countries confirm the *exchange* model explaining the relationship between journalists and political sources. As they seek to control the flow of information, they also need each other in their daily work; information is exchanged for publicity and space in the public sphere. This exchange occurs within a shared culture shaped in the continuous interaction between journalists and their political sources, a culture binding them together. It can also be described as an interpretive community filled with a tacit understanding about its rules and norms. The results from this project show the many dimensions, certainties and uncertainties of this relationship. Both sides need each other, but there are also conflicting interests in the struggle for control of information. Both sides need close and personal relationships, but also professional distance and division of roles. The project gives many examples of this daily exchange between journalists and the political machinery of government.

Second, the analysis establishes that the increasing *resources* in governments for communication and the decreasing resources in newsrooms for political journalism shift the power balance in favour of political sources at the expense of journalists and media at large. 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 apparatus. While the trend is the same in all four countries, the strength of the change differs. However, the changing or diminishing role of political journalism means that powerful sources will be increasingly able to influence and shape the public image of the government and what it is doing. Meanwhile, strategic use of new digital platforms gives political actors new possibilities to bypass the traditional media and shape public images.

One of the most consistent findings in our research, in all four countries but to a varying extent, is the *professionalization* of government communication. Professionalization and increased resources dedicated to government communication intend to make news management more efficient and have centralizing effects on the executive system, strengthening the centre. The result is the several staff dedicated to press secretary work whether in this or any other title. Among the press secretaries themselves, there is simply a functional pressure for more resources dedicated to communication. While the trend is common to all four countries, Finland and especially Sweden have more centralized government communication than Lithuania and Poland. The findings illustrate that context, such as historical legacy and political culture, are still significant for the nature of relationships between journalists and their sources, between media and government.

These findings suggest that this relationship has an important power dimension. It involves questions of power distribution in the political system, a theme also addressed in the project including normative aspects. The results point to long-term *institutional change* in governments with important implications for intra-executive relations. From this research we can conclude that communication involves power, as a means to achieve an outcome. While this is rather obvious, it alerts us to questions of how communication applies in different kinds of democracy and power relations in political life and how it is linked to the distribution of resources. These are questions that we must deal with in the analysis of communication, media and political power.

The results show how functional needs drive the development in terms of resources and practices. This feeds into the debate on redistribution of power in executives. Media generates functional pressures for institutional change. Media is changing how governments organize. Media has a big effect on governments which have adapted thoroughly by implementing effective news management strategies and organizational structures. These have emerged over the decades as a response to functional demands from media for information and access to sources. They arose more out of necessity than choice, because of a functional need; more out of concerns about functional efficiency than about power distribution.

Third, as part of the project, the doctoral thesis, a compilation thesis consisting of an introduction and five articles, offers further insights into relationships between journalists and sources. It explores how their formal and informal interactions are reflected in the news-making in Lithuania and Sweden. How do journalists and sources negotiate their social and professional roles in their relationships with each other? How do journalists and sources think about their relationships with each other? How do they use these relationships in practice? What motives guide the journalists' interactions with sources in different relational contexts? The role-conception analysis is based on 43 qualitative interviews with journalists covering the national politics in the two countries. The data on the role performance consists of reconstruction interviews that cover 517 interactions between journalists and their sources in these countries. Theoretically, the study follows the process model of journalistic roles and discusses autonomy vs. adaptation between journalists and sources both when it comes to role conception and role performance. The results indicate that up to half of all sources who contribute to the media content stay invisible. Also, at least one-third of sources influencing the content are connected to the journalist with closer than purely formal social ties. Formal and informal and visible and invisible forms of interaction between journalists and sources presuppose different roles these sources get to play in the news-making process. These aspects are a significant part of the journalistic routines regardless of the country context. The study concludes that while distance between journalists and sources is a normative condition to achieve

autonomy, social relationships come into play when navigating the competitive environment. Professional and social roles can complement, overlap or be used interchangeably in journalist–source interactions, since sourcing the news is not only a professional practice but also a social practice between human agents who adapt to each other and the expectations from the environment. Informality and formality can drive each other, as informal solutions from journalists and sources emerge as a response to the formal structural constellations that are coordinating and professionalizing the government communication. Prevalence and reliance on different social ties in a certain context, therefore, could be a variable in studies of journalism and political communication culture.

In sum, this project and its results carry two broader implications. First, it suggests that there is an important shift in intra-executive relations and that this shift is partly because of media. More specifically, it suggests that the media has presented governments with functional pressures for institutional change. Our argument and findings about the effects of media on intra-executive relations serve to advance this agenda. Second, this project opens up a new agenda of research. The assumptions which we have advanced may be refined to incorporate other factors. These assumptions may form the basis for inquiries into variation in prime minister–media or journalist–source relationships across time, issue areas, and a larger universe of cases.

3. The project's contribution to the international research frontline

This research project revisits the classic relationship between politics and the media. It reflects an effort to draw from different literatures. The literature on politics and the media—dealing with both power *over* the media and the power *of* the media—is massive, and the same could be said of the comparative politics literature on governments. Yet, there is relatively little on the organizational dimension of government communication, on the processes by which these structures are derived and their effects on the distribution of resources and power. This project explores this topic. It uses previous research as a backdrop for re-examining the relationship between journalists and political sources and between government and media. It joins other recent contributions in showing attempts at central control of government communication.

The project addresses two scholarly and related themes: (1) journalism in different media systems and the relationship between journalists and sources; and (2) empowerment of prime ministers in parliamentary democracies. The project goes beyond existing research in two central respects. First, it integrates the two themes above. Second, the project includes and assesses the full spectrum of government–media relations—personal as well as impersonal relations. Theoretically, analyses are based on a combination of theories: the exchange model, the mediatization of politics, executive power, and theories from comparative media research.

We believe that the project contributes to the international research frontier in two principal ways. First, regarding research on the journalistic profession, there is a broad consensus that journalists and their political sources interact with each other in a variety of ways but there is much less consensus on "who leads the tango", the journalists or the sources. This project considers the determinants of the relationships between journalists and sources/staff in the Finnish, Lithuanian, Polish, and Swedish political executives. This analysis builds mainly on extensive interviews with journalists and executive staff regarding media-related matters in governments and is supplemented by documentary evidence. Altogether, more than 80 face-to-face interviews were conducted with journalists

and government media/political advisors, press secretaries, and politicians. The book advances a specific argument about how the strategic exchange of access and information between political sources and journalists brings them together while still maintaining a certain distance. Accordingly, we argue, they are both close and distant. There is interactivity and reciprocity—a mutual exchange, but also distance. In one way, journalists and politicians are forever locked in a daily power struggle. From another perspective, they are in a kind of working relationship with one another. The project illuminates these connections. One thing is certain: politicians and journalists need each other.

While we often think of the relationship between government and media as hostile, in this project we show a kind of partnership by emphasizing the ways in which government and media organizations benefit from this relationship despite the tensions. This project also approaches the relationship from both sides: politics and media. Whereas studies of journalism have revealed the power of sources in suggesting and shaping if not determining the news, the literature is asymmetrical, with more journalists' views of the process than perspectives from the politicians' side.

Second, as a consequence of above, the project makes an important contribution by questioning assumptions and findings of "mediatization" research. While an alluring concept, "mediatization" simplifies the analysis of media effects on politics by overlooking or underestimating important institutional implications of media on governments and political uses of media. Our research suggests a less linear and more complicated or multifaceted picture. Our findings challenge those who suggest that governments primarily adapt to rather than shape media. The relationship between politics and the media seems much more politics-driven than previous research claims. The combined effect of downsized newsrooms, increasingly resource-strong and professionalized government communication identified in this project results in the interpretation that political actors and structures have been strengthened through the instrumentalization of the media. Political power possesses instruments for trying to control information flows either through or bypassing traditional media.

In all, we believe the project, with its comparative and multidisciplinary approach, makes an important contribution in how it engages with the fundamentals, in exploring further the media relations of the governments and how our findings point out the many aspects of journalist–source relationships and of government communication. There are many findings that warrant further exploration; similar studies in Europe and elsewhere also see how the cultures play out and how Europe is different from the US. By making comparisons between different media systems and political systems, we contribute to the discussion about what is related to a national context and what features are parts of a common political communication culture in Europe and beyond.

Overviewing the field, Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch (2020: 346), two leading political communication scholars, refer to our study on Finland, Lithuania, Poland, and Sweden and note that it maintains that political actors integrate the media logic into their political strategies in two ways: as one strategy, they use news management, spin doctors, centralized communication, and informal personal networks to deal with journalists; as another strategy, they use social media to bypass the traditional media (Johansson and Nygren 2019). Esser and Pfetsch (2020: 346) further note that in the area of government communication a follow-up study among European countries revealed that the general trend towards more centralized, coordinated government communication, made necessary by growing pressure from a fragmented media environment and a polarized party

landscape, was more pronounced in strategically operating countries than in tactically operating ones (Johansson and Raunio 2019).

Reference: Esser, Frank, and Pfetsch, Barbara (2020). Political Communication. In Daniele Caramani (Ed.), *Comparative Politics* (pp. 336–358). 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

While participants share interest in the project's overall issues and approaches, for some the research reported in this project begins with the perspective of journalists, focusing on their conditions, for others with the perspective of political sources, focusing on their organizational demands and expectations in making news. During the course of the project there have duly emerged new research questions or variations of the initial questions. Questions raised in the edited volume may reappear and be refined in journal articles. Beyond the questions raised in the research proposal the project has come to address more questions covering aspects of professionalization, which fits into a trend of practice-oriented research. For example: What is it really like to be government press secretary? Mapping everyday practices, coupled with what the project finds about centralized control of government communication, has led to normative questions about democratic governance and the nature of modern-day governing.

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe

The project was carried out jointly by altogether ten researchers from the universities of Helsinki, Kaunas, Södertörn, Tampere, and Wrocław. The participation of researchers from four countries around the Baltic Sea and the comparative orientation guaranteed that the project would somehow lead to improved knowledge of politics and media in these countries and beyond. During the project, creative collaborative constellations arose which also had an added value in terms of new and relevant knowledge. In brief, the empirical findings and comparative analyses demonstrate the media and political development and how they interact. The two East-Central European countries participating in the project, Lithuania and Poland, while exhibiting variation in several respects, differ from Finland and Sweden in the media system and political system. Despite significant changes over the past three decades, there are institutional path-dependencies which in part can be explained by political culture and political communication culture (see above). Institutions change, but often there are resistances to changes in institutional arrangements or mere institutional inertia.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

Project website: https://www.polexmedia.com/

Publications

Doctoral thesis (compilation thesis)

• Malling, Milda. 2022. *The Story Behind the News: Informal and Invisible Interactions between Journalists and Their Sources in Two Countries.* Sundsvall: Mid Sweden University. (OA) https://miun.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1646194/FULLTEXT01.pdf

Edited volume

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Gunnar Nygren, eds. 2019. *Close and Distant: Political Executive–Media Relations in Four Countries.* Gothenburg: Nordicom. (OA) https://nordicom.gu.se/en/publications/close-and-distant

Chapters in edited volume

• Nygren, Gunnar, and Karl Magnus Johansson. "The interplay of media and the political executive: Introduction and framework".

• Niemikari, Risto, Tapio Raunio, and Tom Moring. "Finland: Informal interdependence and occasional clashes".

• Balčytienė, Auksė, and Milda Malling. "Lithuania: Media-politics interaction shaped by benefits-oriented reasoning".

• Dobek-Ostrowska, Bogusława, and Jacek Nożewski. "Poland: Independent vs servile relationships".

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, Milda Malling, and Gunnar Nygren. "Sweden: A professionally symbiotic relationship".

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Tapio Raunio. "Government communication in a comparative perspective".

• Johansson, Elena. "Social media in political communication: A substitute for conventional media?".

• Malling, Milda. "Power and exchange in formal and informal interaction between journalists and their sources".

• Nygren, Gunnar, and Risto Niemikari. "Media logics as parts of the political toolkit: A critical discussion on theories of mediatisation of politics".

• Balčytienė, Auksė, and Tom Moring. "Variations in political communication culture: New forms of political parallelisms and media-politics coalitions".

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Gunnar Nygren. "Locked in a mutual dependency: Media and the political executive in close interplay".

Articles in peer-review journals

• Johansson, Elena, and Jacek Nożewski. 2018. "Polish and Swedish journalist-politician Twitter networks: Who are the gatekeepers?". (OA) *Central European Journal of Communication* 11(2): 129–150. (OA) DOI: https://doi.org/10.19195/1899-5101.11.2(21).2

• Johansson, Elena, and Karl Magnus Johansson. 2021. "Along the government–media frontier: Press secretaries offline/online". *Journal of Public Affairs,* published online 13 September 2021. (OA) DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2759

• Johansson, Karl Magnus. 2021. "Stärker mediemakten regeringsmakten?" [Does media power strengthen governmental power?]. *Statsvetenskaplig tidskrift* [*Swedish Journal of Political Science*] 123 (1): 5–25. (OA) https://journals.lub.lu.se/st/article/view/22769

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Tapio Raunio. 2020. "Centralizing Government Communication? Evidence from Finland and Sweden". *Politics & Policy* 48 (6): 1138–1160. (OA) DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12370

• Malling, Milda. 2021. "Reconstructing the Informal and Invisible: Interactions Between Journalists and Political Sources in Two Countries". *Journalism Practice*, published online 26 May 2021. (OA) DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1930571

• Malling, Milda. 2021. "Sources that Trigger the News: Multiplexity of Social Ties in News Discovery". *Journalism Studies* 22 (10): 1298–1316. (OA) DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1951331

Reports and popular science publications

• Johansson, Karl Magnus. 2018. "Statsministern och medierna" [The prime minister and the media], in *Snabbtänkt: Reflektioner från valet 2018 av ledande forskare*, edited by Lars Nord, Marie Grusell, Niklas Bolin, and Kajsa Falasca. Sundsvall: Demicom. (OA) https://www.miun.se/contentassets/54cedf98197546b8a0f318c791613eda/snabbtankt_2018.pdf

Papers in progress or under review

• Johansson, Karl Magnus. "Prime ministers and their media advisers".

• Malling, Milda. "Trust is context dependent: reconstruction of trust dynamics between journalists and their sources".

Monograph in progress

• Johansson, Karl Magnus. "The Prime Minister–Media Nexus: Centralization Logic and Application". (Publishing agreement with Springer Nature/Palgrave Macmillan)

Events

Public engagement

• Milda Malling, "Formella och informella relationer mellan journalister och deras källor" [Formal and informal relations between journalists and their sources], Swedish Radio, P1 Medierna, 29 May 2021.

• Milda Malling, "Vem bestämmer vad politikerna bryr sig om?" [Who decides what the politicians care about?], Seminar, Visby, 3 July 2019.

• Gunnar Nygren, "Journalisterna, politikerna och kampen om agendan" [The journalists, the politicians and the fight for the agenda], Seminar, Centre for Business and Policy Studies, SNS, Stockholm, 9 April 2019.

• Tom Moring and Gunnar Nygren, "Politikens makt över medier" [The power of politics over media], Talk, Södertörn University, 5 April 2019.

• Karl Magnus Johansson, "Journalisters minskade makt över agendan" [The reduced power of journalists over the agenda], Swedish Radio, P1 Medierna, 2 March 2019.

• Karl Magnus Johansson and Gunnar Nygren, "Även svenska medier styrs alltmer effektivt av politiken" [Swedish media are also increasingly efficiently controlled by the politics], DN Debatt, *Dagens Nyheter*, 3 February 2019.

Press release and article

• "Ministerns nära medarbetare – så jobbar Regeringskansliets pressekreterare" [The Minister's close aide - this is how the Government Offices' press secretaries work], Press release [based on interview with Karl Magnus Johansson and his journal article co-authored with Elena Johansson], Södertörn University, 25 November 2021.

• "Regeringens pressekreterare har allt mer makt" [The government's press secretaries have more and more power], Article [based on interview with Karl Magnus Johansson and his journal article co-authored with Elena Johansson], Södertörn University, 26 November 2021.

Book launch

• 18 February 2019. Södertörn University.

Poster presentations

• Poster session presentations at the Research Day of the School of Social Sciences, Södertörn University, 10 December 2015 and 15 December 2016.

Project workshops

• Project workshop 1. 5 September 2014. Södertörn University.

• Project workshop 2. 12-13 March 2015. Södertörn University. Guest: Zvi Reich.

• Project workshop 3. 17-18 March 2016. Södertörn University.

• Project workshop 4. 8-9 December 2016. Södertörn University.

• Project workshop 5. 14 June 2017. Park Hotel, Ljubljana.

• Project workshop 6. 15 December 2017. Södertörn University.

• Project workshop 7. 24 May 2018. Charles University, Prague.

Seminars organized (selection)

• Zvi Reich, Ben-Gurion University, Israel, "The de-specialization of news reporting in an increasingly specialized world", Södertörn University, March 11, 2015.

• Aeron Davis, Goldsmiths College, London, "Media-Source Relations in the Era of Mediatized Politicians and Politicized Journalists", Södertörn University, November 12, 2015.

The five most important conferences (organized and papers presented)

(1–2) Central and East European Communication and Media Consortium (CEECOM) (Ljubljana 2017 panel, Sofia 2019)

• Balčytienė, Auksė, and Milda Malling. 2017. "Media and politics in Lithuania: From uneasy to professionalized relationship". Paper prepared for presentation at the CEECOM conference, Ljubljana, June 15–17, 2017.

• Dobek-Ostrowska, Bogusława, and Jacek Nożewski. 2017. "Political executive and media relations in democratic Poland: The third decade of experience". Paper presented at the CEECOM conference, Ljubljana, June 15–17, 2017.

• Johansson, Elena, and Jacek Nożewski. 2017. "Polish and Swedish journalists' source networks in Twitter: Who takes control?". Paper presented at the CEECOM conference, Ljubljana, June 15–17, 2017.

• Johansson, Elena, and Karl Magnus Johansson. 2019. "Along the government–media frontier: Press secretaries offline/online". Paper presented at the CEECOM conference, Sofia, June 19–21, 2019.

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, Milda Malling, and Gunnar Nygren. 2017. "Sweden – "professionally symbiotic" relations". Paper presented at the CEECOM conference, Ljubljana, June 15–17, 2017.

• Niemikari, Risto, Tapio Raunio, and Tom Moring. 2017. "Informal interdependence: Relations between the political executive and media in Finland". Paper presented at the CEECOM conference, Ljubljana, June 15–17, 2017.

(3–4) International Communication Association (ICA) (Prague 2018 panel, virtual 2021)

• Balčytienė, Auksė, and Tom Moring. 2018. "Variations in political communication culture: new forms of political parallelisms and media-politics coalitions". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

• Johansson, Elena. 2018. "Social media for top politicians: comparative case illustrations from Finland, Poland and Sweden". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

• Johansson, Karl Magnus, and Tapio Raunio. 2018. "Government communication in comparative perspective". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

• Malling, Milda. 2018. "Formal and informal interaction: power and exchange between journalists and their political sources (Lithuania and Sweden)". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

• Malling, Milda. 2021. "Multiplexity of Trust Between Journalists and Their Sources: Situational and General, Formal and Informal Contexts". Paper presented at the ICA conference (virtual), May 27–31, 2021.

• Nożewski, Jacek. 2018. "Professional relations between politicians, journalists and press secretaries in Poland". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

• Nygren, Gunnar, and Risto Niemikari. 2018. "Journalists and political power – mediatization and political instrumentalization". Paper presented at the ICA conference, Prague, May 24–28, 2018.

(5) International Journal of Press/Politics (Oxford 2016)

• Malling, Milda. 2016. "Professionalized political communication vs. speedy-journalism: who gains the power?". Paper presented at the second annual International Journal of Press/Politics conference, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, September 28–30, 2016.