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Chapter 5

Sweden

A professionally symbiotic relationship

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Abstract

This chapter explores political executive-media relations in Sweden, with a particular focus on professional day-to-day relationships and habits. The analysis is mainly based on extensive interviews with journalists and government press secretaries, and it establishes the routinisation at work, as well as the professionalisation. The exchanges between journalists and their sources appear to be close but with recognition of each other's professional roles. Media developments influence the relationship, and the downsizing of newsrooms, multi-platform production 24/7 and increased competition for unique news have made journalists more dependent on available sources. At the same time, professionalisation of government communication makes news management more efficient and has centralising effects on executive systems. Together these trends shift the balance between journalists and their political sources in favour of the latter. The presented findings have important implications for research on journalism, media and political executives.

Keywords: political communication, political journalism, professionalisation, media-tisation, Sweden

Introduction

According to the political journalists and government press advisors that were interviewed, relationships between politicians and political journalists have changed in many ways in the last 20-30 years. One general explanation is the developments that have taken place on a systems level: the relationships have evolved from a system of cooperation and understanding, with its roots in the old party press system, to a system based on professionalisation on both sides. The relationship is still close, but as one press advisor formulates it, it is “professionally symbiotic”.

A good example of the development is the coverage of the government's presentation of the proposed state budget. In the 1980s, newsrooms received the documents in advance and could prepare to present news on the budget. By the 1990s, this system of cooperation had ended, and journalists had to look for leaks. In the 2010s, the govern-

ment has once again taken control over the coverage by giving parts of the proposal to selected news organisations in advance. Obviously, the reason behind this strategy is the wish to maximise coverage and publicity.

One senior reporter gives his version of this development:

When I started to work as a political reporter in the 1990s [...] and I succeeded in reporting on the plan for state finances the day before, it was regarded as great news. Now the government works this way itself [...] and offers the newsrooms part of the budget weeks before, and very few newsrooms manage to say no, even if they know this is only a part of the whole budget [...]. It becomes a problem because you are in their hands. (Swedish journalist 4)

According to the experienced reporters in the interviews, this is a typical example of how increased resources in government administration and stronger efforts to control the political news agenda are visible in their daily work. From the “other side”, attempts to control the agenda are confirmed in the descriptions of a detailed and advanced PR work from government information officials.

The analysis in this chapter is based on in-depth interviews, lasting on average around one hour, with both journalists and government press advisors/secretaries.¹ Ten political journalists and commentators in leading news media (including press, radio, TV and news agencies) were interviewed, most of them in the spring of 2016. From late 2014 to early 2017, 11 press advisors/secretaries working for the governments from 2006 and onwards were interviewed, among them press secretaries based both in the prime minister’s office (PMO) and in line ministries. Since the interviewees were granted anonymity, the descriptions of their positions are vague. In order to be able to make systematic comparisons, all interviews were transcribed and analysed thematically. To supplement this data, requests were placed with the government offices (GOs) to obtain documentation concerning communication and coordination.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we outline some specifics of the Swedish context. Second, we present our case study of political executive-media relations. Finally, we conclude by discussing the findings and their implications.

From party press to commercialism

Until the 1970s, Sweden had a party press with newspapers that were either owned or closely tied to the political parties. In this system, readers supported the party behind the newspaper that they read, and the newspapers were part of the political system – a kind of political parallelism, as described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). This system is now gone, and the newspapers are owned by companies that have both commercial and general publishing goals.

In broadcasting, public service held a monopoly until 1994, when commercial television was introduced. However, public service is still strong and enjoys broad political support. Among the commercial channels, only TV4 is producing news on a daily basis; the other commercial channels have a strong focus on entertainment.

Internet-based news media is almost completely connected to media companies in the traditional channels. The media company with the largest online presence is Schibsted, which controls two large newspapers, the largest news site and many online services. In addition to the news provided by the traditional companies, new niche sites have developed as “alternative news channels”, often giving voice to populist and xenophobic voices. However, these “alternative” online news providers have minor audiences compared to mainstream media.

Most newspapers are owned by foundations or families, and the majority of the newspapers represent some kind of “liberal” profile. Although the party press system has disappeared, politicians can still be found on the boards. This occurs mostly on the regional and local level; a consequence of it is occasional conflicts in relation to local scandals.

The Norwegian company Schibsted owns two Swedish newspapers – the social democratic tabloid *Aftonbladet* and the conservative quality paper *Svenska Dagbladet*. Thus, the two newspapers owned by Schibsted have completely different readers, and they cover two different segments of the market. For Schibsted, the political affiliation is only a kind of market definition. The same is true with regard to the social democratic newspapers that are owned by larger liberal newspapers; they are kept alive for market reasons and through state press subsidies.

Table 5.1 The political system and the media system in Sweden

Characteristics	Sweden
Political system	Unitary state with parliamentary system
Electoral system	Proportional representation (multi-member constituencies)
Party system	Fragmented (eight parties in parliament)
Turnout (national elections)	Around 80 per cent
Government	Coalition (Social Democrats and Green Party)
Media system	Dual public-private broadcasting system, private newspaper business
Public service broadcasting share of time in viewing (2016)	High (37%), with TV4 as domestic commercial competitor (22%)
Newspaper reading (subscriptions per 1,000 inhabitants, 2015)	Medium (191), in a market dominated by eight large groups

Source: Adapted from Strömbäck and van Aelst (2010). Statistics from Nordicom database.

Strong government communication

The role of the media in political communication has become increasingly important and the political control of the news media is weaker than before the fall of the party press system and the commercialisation of the media. Attempts to influence the coverage have been growing for many years (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014), and to a large extent, Swedish politics is mediatised politics. As elsewhere, there is an ongoing professionalisation of political/government communication in Sweden (Falasca & Nord, 2013; Strömbäck & Nord, 2008).

The resources allocated for government communication have grown massively over the past five decades. One very concrete expression of this decades-long process of change is the significant increase in staff, including staff for press and information, at the GO and the PMO. The central steps in this process are summarised in Table 5.2. Notably, the first press secretary ever was employed for the prime minister (PM) in 1963, when the PMO could still be described as very slim with a staff of just a few. Over the following decades the number of staff increased, reaching 187 at the end of 2017 (down from a peak of 203 in 2012) (Government offices of Sweden, 2017).

Table 5.2 Major changes in the system of government communication in Sweden

Year	Change
1963	The first press secretary is employed by the government offices (GOs) in the prime minister's office (PMO).
1970s	Additional press or information secretaries are employed.
1976	The non-socialist government speeds up the pace of "mediatisation" with the appointment of additional press or information secretaries.
1982	The Social Democrats return to power. Day-to-day coordination shifts from the ministries of the respective party leaders to the PMO.
1991	A chief press officer is appointed in the PMO. Day-to-day coordination by a new coordination secretariat in the PMO.
1994	The position of chief press officer is proposed in the preparations for the change in government, but is not appointed.
2000	The position of chief press officer is re-established in the PMO and put in charge of media management and coordination, working closely with the PM.
2006	The state secretary to the PM effectively undertakes the duties of a chief press officer. She resigns the following year and a chief press officer is appointed.
2010	A state secretary for communication is established in the PMO.
2011	The position of state secretary for communication in the PMO is abolished.
2014	All government press secretaries are employed by the PMO (and no longer at a specific ministry). Daily morning press meetings are held at the PMO with all press secretaries. Day-to-day policy coordination remains in the PMO.
2016	A strengthening of central government communication with the appointment of an additional deputy chief press officer designated to stand in for the chief press officer if necessary.

Source: Adapted and extended from Erlandsson (2008), and Falasca and Nord (2013).

The shift from a centre-right government to a social democratic-green government in 2014 brought about a further strengthening of the government communication machinery through centralisation to the PMO. Like his predecessor, the new PM brought the chief press officer from the party central office to the PMO.

All in all, today there is one chief press officer with two deputies (one from each governing party), 30 press secretaries, and a staff of press assistants, press coordinators and press communicators. Press assistants and press communicators are non-political and employed by each ministry or the PMO. They work very closely with the press secretaries and the political teams/staff.

Organisationally, all press secretaries are based at SB Press, directly under the PM. This is also where all ministerial press secretaries in the GO are employed. Press secretaries are all political appointees employed under the GO agreement on politically appointed staff, such as state secretaries, press secretaries and political advisors. Out of around 4,800 employees in the GO, some 200 are political appointees (Government offices of Sweden, 2017).

There are also numerous information officers or communicators who are non-political officials. Their external communication activities include communicating the government's policies and the work of the ministers, preparing public appearances and speeches, and replying to letters from members of the public and questions from the media. The activities of the government and the GO are communicated through various digital channels, including the official website and social media. Nowadays, there is also a policy document regulating how ministers should act in social media (Government offices of Sweden, 2016).²

The document "Communication policy for the government offices" regulates the internal and external communication and is the common basis for the communication activities (Government offices of Sweden, 2012).³ Interestingly, among the sources interviewed, only a few were aware of this document and none of them seemed to have read it. Our interpretation is that this document is primarily for information officers (the communicators who are not political appointees). To them, it is a steering document, whereas the political appointees are instead governed by the standard operating procedures evolving in their immediate environment. This is significant insofar as it reflects the emerging practices and the extent to which the operating procedures are informal. All in all, it is striking how little formalisation there is in the form of written documents on communication.

The policy contains objectives and core values and describes the division of responsibilities for communication activities in the GO: "A prerequisite for good communication is that it is coordinated and well considered. This is achieved through a clear division of responsibilities." For this, the "ultimate responsibility" lies with the PMO.

Changes over time in political journalism and politics

The time perspective and experience differ between press advisors and reporters. Many of the journalists have worked for a long time in the field, some of them for 25-30 years. In contrast, since the press advisors are politically appointed, they are generally replaced if the government changes after an election. The interviewed press advisors include both advisors connected to the former centre-right government from 2006 and advisors to the social democratic-green government from 2014.

Despite the differences with regard to time perspective and experience, the images conveyed by the groups are similar – both present a picture of a relationship marked by increased distance and professionalisation.

From the perspective of the journalists

The more senior reporters talked about closer relationships in the 1980s. At that time, it was common for political reporters to have a background in politics, perhaps in some newspapers connected to one of the political parties. One reporter in public service recalled:

If you had been in politics, you had some kind of competence, you understood the machinery and then you became a political journalist. But you still had the old relationships with part of the political sphere, a relationship that was not private, but on the border to being private [...]. Today, journalists are less corrupted by friendship than before. (Swedish journalist 5)

None of the ten political reporters in our study has a political background. They mention politically interested families, but their way into journalism has been through studies at universities and professional journalism education. This change is part of the professionalisation of journalism, and today nearly 90 per cent of all young journalists in Sweden have a professional education (Głowacki, 2015).

Another senior newspaper reporter described how, when he entered the field 25 years ago, journalists and politicians would have parties together. Today this is not so common, with the exception of the annual “politicians’ week” on the island of Gotland (and even this informal gathering has become more institutionalised; see Wendt, 2012).

However, one informal platform for journalists covering the parliament remains: the Association of parliamentary reporters. This organisation, which is quite small, invites politicians, including the PM with staff, to meet journalists and talk “off the record”. This organisation is mentioned by several reporters, and some of them question the meetings due to the closeness they may result in.

Another change mentioned by several of the older reporters is the increased security measures around government and parliamentary buildings. This development has had a strong impact on the possibilities for daily and close coverage of the

ministries and parliament. One senior reporter described the increasingly limited access in buildings in this way:

Security has changed things for the worse for us. Before, we could walk in and out of party offices in the parliament, now we can't even stand at the entrance of Rosenbad [the government headquarters]. The security police tell us to stand on the grass in the little park outside, and we have to shout at the ministers when they come for the weekly government meeting. (Swedish journalist 6)

Other reporters talked about times when it was possible just to knock on the party leader's door, and walk around in the ministries and in parliament asking for official documents and information. This is impossible now; every visit has to be announced in advance and a visiting journalist is followed all the time. Information is also more controlled, according to reporters with long experience. One reporter started to cover the government in 1992, and he describes an increased willingness to control:

People working in the ministries are much more nervous now about what can be handed out; the political influence is stronger and political secretaries are more influential. Everybody is more anxious about the images and pictures shown in public [...]. The officials are more anxious and afraid of talking. (Swedish journalist 1)

Another reporter with 20 years of experience in public service shared how press secretaries are more active in limiting the possibilities for direct contact with politicians – “they are a filter all the time [...], not only in contact with the government, but also with members of parliament”. This picture of increased information management in combination with fewer opportunities for spontaneous meetings with sources was confirmed by all the experienced reporters.

Other important changes have taken place in the newsrooms. Today, journalists regularly produce for several different platforms, and this takes time away from research and contact with sources. One reporter on a daily newspaper said that about half his time is devoted to web and online TV, and this gives him less time for traditional research:

The demand has increased on reporters [and] you have to be productive [...]. You have to produce TV and write for both the print edition and the web; you have to be all-round in the craft, but you also need deeper and broader knowledge in the area because there are fewer of us than before. (Swedish journalist 3)

Many newsrooms have downsized, with the consequence of there being less room for specialists and a larger demand for generalists among reporters. This was noted by a reporter in public service, and it has consequences for relationships with sources. This reporter is not only covering the government, but all kinds of news from five in the morning:

There are fewer journalists devoting much time to developing sources [and there are] fewer doing this kind of news that is revealing something [...]. Resources have been saved and downsized [...] and we notice it. (Swedish journalist 2)

From the perspective of the sources

The press secretaries emphasise the increased importance of communication. One of them works for a minister with experience from the government in the 1980s: “At that time they had 15 press secretaries, now it is about 150 [working with communication] – a kind of increased professionalisation not to give a messy impression.”

All of the interviewed press secretaries who are now employed by the GO started to work after the 2014 election, when the Social Democratic-Green government came to power. To provide us with a longer perspective, some press secretaries from the former centre-right government from 2006 were included in the sample. However, the personal experience of change is much shorter among government officials than among many of the journalists.

Most of the press secretaries have a similar background: work in youth or student organisations of the parties, a university education and some previous experience from working with either PR or corporate information. Many of the press secretaries emphasised the importance of an understanding of politics – “we work in a political environment, and for that you need both a political compass and political competence,” (Swedish press secretary 3) one of them explained.

Before 2006, Sweden had mostly had one-party governments with less need for coordinated communication, but when the centre-right coalition took over in 2006, communication was a crucial part of the strategy. In several books, journalists and the former PM describe how the chief press officer was placed in the small group of people effectively leading the Moderate Party (e.g., Kristofferson, 2006; Pihlblad, 2012). Consequently, when the centre-right coalition (“the Alliance”) came into government, information for all ministries was centralised under the PMO. That information from government was strongly coordinated is confirmed in the interviews with press secretaries working in 2006. One of them says:

All politics becomes media, because all politics is communication [...]. There is no one working with politics not dealing with media. Do you understand? It is not like a company where the CEO goes to the information director and in the end a press secretary sends out a bulletin... [In politics], everybody is in on the discussion... [A press secretary] has to be interested in politics, and understand politics and the culture of the party [...]. So, in politics a press secretary becomes a central station, a spider in the web. It is not like in a company. (Swedish press secretary 2)

Another press secretary from that time emphasised the increased speed in media coverage as another reason why there are more resources dedicated to communication and more coordination within the government: “Everything is much faster [...], when something is written on Twitter, it can be a news article” (Swedish press secretary 7).

The new Social Democratic-Green government from 2014 took over, and even strengthened, the model of centralised information in the GO. All press secretaries

are formally employed by the PMO, and coordination is strong with daily meetings. One of the press secretaries explained:

It is a result of the spirit of the times and the demands for better control of what different parts are doing. In more intense media coverage, we need to have better control over what we are sending out [...]. Just basic things such as ministers not having press conferences at the same time, releasing news that competes with each other [...]. We have a never-ending, 24-hour news cycle; everything happens at a crazy speed. (Swedish press secretary 7)

Thus, press secretaries from both the former and the new government notice the more intense pressure on journalists. Many reporters have worked in the industry for a long time and accumulated a lot of political knowledge. Sometimes they actually know more than the press secretaries, one of them said.

However, in a high-speed media environment, there is little time for fact checking in the newsroom. One press secretary has observed a change since 2006, and confirms the journalists' accounts about downsized newsrooms:

There are fewer specialised reporters, and you have to explain things more basically for the journalists [...]. As a press secretary you have to have more control. (Swedish press secretary 1)

Both the journalists and the press secretaries painted the same general picture of an increased level of planned communication in the government. There are many explanations behind this development, some of them are political and some of them are connected to the media. Among the political reasons are a greater need for coordination in coalition governments and an increased awareness of the role of communication in politics. This can be seen as an adaptation to media logic. At the same time, some of the changes are also affecting the media (e.g., increased speed and new media platforms). This brings us to our next analytical dimension: professionalisation.

Professionalisation on both sides

The development of political journalism and government communication can be analysed as processes of professionalisation. In western Europe, the professionalisation of journalism has emerged as a strong trend that parallels the decline of the party press and the commercialisation of the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In Sweden, professionalisation has been well documented since the 1960s and 1970s, often in terms of a gradual separation of journalism from the political system (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull, 2001). At the same time, surveys show that the political preferences of news reporters are quite different from those of the general population: journalists lean more to the left, and they often vote for small green and left-wing parties. This can be explained

by their professional ideology: journalists are supposed to oppose power (Asp, 2007).

Professionalisation is strong in Swedish legacy media, with a large degree of autonomy both in relation to owners and sources, at least according to answers from journalists in surveys (Nygren et al., 2015). The ideal of journalists being a watchdog for power has gradually become stronger, while the more passive ideal of being a “mirror of society” has become weaker (Wiik, 2010).

The standards of professional integrity make it problematic to move between journalism and the political sphere, but two of the interviewed press advisors have previously worked as journalists. This follows the results from a study of so-called “policy professionals” in Sweden (Garsten et al., 2015; see also Svallfors, 2017). This growing group (to which press advisors belong) consists of political employees – political actors who are not democratically elected and often have a background in PR and communication. In the study of Swedish “policy professionals”, it is shown that secretaries shape the public statements of ministers and work both with and against the media; journalists may be punished as well as rewarded for their work.

The professionalisation of government communication is more recent than that of journalism: in the interviews it is visible within a perspective of 15-20 years. The press advisors working in the centre-right coalition after the 2006 election emphasised how communication was placed at the political centre. One press advisor working close to the PM said that the PM made it clear that press advisors could disrupt any meeting he was having. In the new government, all press advisors to all ministers were put directly under the chief press officer and the PM himself (see above).

Press advisors are part of the political staff, together with the ministers, state secretaries, political advisors and a few other officials. All press advisors talked about daily briefings with the minister, and discussions on how to handle good or bad publicity. One senior press advisor explained the close relation between politics and communication:

If we have a discussion on why the media image became so bad, perhaps we should go back to discuss why we are dealing with politics [...]. If you want a good press advisor, it should be somebody that knows politics, because that is the thing! (Swedish press secretary 2)

Senior reporters with 20-25 years of experience talked about more active and more controlling press advisors. Often, press advisors are present in interviews with ministers; some ministers have them by their side for all kinds of communication. One reporter summarises the development:

My impression is that press departments have much more influence; they control more and this is mostly bad. They are very nervous and want to decide what ministers and politicians should say or not say, and they care very much about conveying the right message. Many are very young. They are political activists who love their parties and work for them. They are nice and pleasant, but the messages from politicians have become much more professionalised. (Swedish journalist 9)

One senior reporter called the press advisor “the butler of the minister” (Swedish journalist 10), and together with the state secretary, the press advisor is the minister’s most important co-worker. Another reporter said there are differences between press advisors. Some are very good and understand the role of the journalists, but others are more like gatekeepers: “They see their work as protecting the minister.” This impression is shared by other reporters. One senior reporter made a comparison to the 1990s:

Earlier you had a phone number directly to the minister, but now almost never. Everything is much more managed, and I have to phone the press advisor [...]. Ministers are quite different, some are not afraid at all and are used to media, but others are much more difficult to interview. They want more control and it also depends on what press advisor they have, if the press advisor is a control freak [...]. Some politicians never open their mouth without their press advisor behind them. (Swedish journalist 1)

The reporters considered this to be “planned communication” and labelled the press advisors critically as “spin doctors”. Many of the reporters said that press advisors made phone calls to offer them exclusive news. The carefully planned presentation of the state budget is just one example; there are daily examples of this active spread of positive news. The reporters are ambivalent about this kind of news: on the one hand, they can be the first to present exclusive news about government proposals; on the other hand, they have to give the news a presentation the sources are satisfied with. If they do not do this, there is always the risk that the press advisor decides to call somebody else the next time.

The politician or the official hopes you present it just like they want it, and without any critical questions. [And if you do this], then you will get the next news because you are reporting kindly. [The journalist] gets into some kind of dependence in relation to the person [...]. This kind of “giveaway news” packaged by information departments is very dull to report. (Swedish journalist 7)

Another reporter remarked that press advisors often call him directly, and not the editor at the desk. This is a more effective way to influence the presentation: the press advisors and the reporter already know one another and press advisors are very proactive in their work. But not only to promote positive news – one reporter told a story about a press advisor at the PMO who used to ask him to stop publishing news the PMO did not like.

[The press advisor] would scream into the telephone and threaten [...]; would say “this is wrong”, and in some way say, in a very threatening tone, that I was wrong about things [...]. It was an extremely aggressive effort to protect the prime minister [...]. And I have also had similar experiences with other press advisors who tried to take down the news I reported by their own press information and through Facebook. (Swedish journalist 3)

The relationship between professional actors on both sides is very much about the control of information. By taking control of information and, in some cases, negotiating with reporters, the press advisors work to promote “good” news. In this interplay, professional journalists try to navigate to find information and news without being too dependent on press advisors and other official sources, and without being transformed into a pawn in a political game. How this works in the daily routines is the subject of the next section.

Routines in daily work

According to both journalists and press secretaries, their daily work is very much decided by political structures: Calendars with meetings, conferences and travels provide the framework for daily work and coverage. A larger framework is provided by the schedule in parliament (days for different debates, budget procedures and proposals), party congresses and the four-year election cycle. This framework creates a steady flow of news that must be handled by both press secretaries and journalists. One journalist listed some examples:

If there is a committee on profits in the welfare systems, we do something about this and try to find out in advance what is in the proposals, who thinks what about it and get some reactions. If the Christian Democrats are going to elect a new leader, we follow it and try to find out how the discussion is progressing in the party. [My work] is quite influenced by the agenda in the political sphere. (Swedish Journalist 9)

The daily work of the press advisors is also structured around the calendar for the minister – travels, public speeches, meetings and other appointments. One press advisor to the PM gave this example:

There are many things that a prime minister does that need to be planned in detail. If we are going to visit somewhere, we have to decide where to go, where to stand, where to meet the press, who is going to be present, what will happen during what moment and how the transport will work [...]. I always have to be updated, always reachable, always be in control [...]. And when we are out, we meet a lot of journalists. (Swedish press secretary 1)

A regular day for the journalists and the press secretaries often begins the same way – checking social media and the most important media channels to see if there is any news that must be dealt with. Social media is mostly used as a tool to stay up to date with the latest events (see also Chapter 7). For this, Twitter is often used, even if many think Twitter is “dumbing down” the debate. Among them is one senior journalist:

I read mail and I check Facebook and Twitter [...] But Twitter, I have still not received any news there worth anything. It is a playground for idiots. (Swedish journalist 10)

Twitter is mostly used to get an overview of the flow of news and trends, both for journalists and political sources engaged with everyday politics (Berglez, 2016; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Some journalists publish links to their stories on Twitter, and some press secretaries promote some news there, but the value of social media is not regarded very highly by either of the two groups. Twitter is very much regarded as a network for elites. Nevertheless, nobody dares not to follow Twitter and miss out on any news. A press secretary explains why the minister has chosen not to use Twitter – “it is a pond for ducks, always the same people there, and what kind of people do you reach on Twitter?” (Swedish press secretary 6)

In the ministries, the political staff hold daily meetings to plan the events for the day, evaluate the media flow and discuss possible actions to promote important issues for the minister. The political staff are quite small in number: The minister, the state secretary, the political advisors and the press advisor. In addition, all press secretaries have a daily 15-minute meeting (either at the PMO or on the telephone) with the chief press officer (or a deputy chief press officer) directly under the PM. Communication is coordinated to maximise the attention for the issues the government wants to promote.

In the newsrooms, the news flow of the day is also discussed at daily meetings. In some newsrooms, journalists are eager to emphasise that they decide the news agenda themselves; they do not want to follow the agenda of the political system. One reporter said:

We don't run to all press conferences [...]. We have our own journalism and we are working on stories on our own agenda. (Swedish journalist 6)

Another senior reporter emphasised that he chooses the stories himself, and that he is not influenced by any political agenda. This independence is important for all journalists, but many admit that, from a broader perspective, journalists are trapped in the flow of political issues created by the system they are supposed to cover.

Who leads the tango?

The question of which side is taking the lead in this dance is difficult to answer. Some researchers conclude that journalists generally take the lead (Strömbäck & Nord, 2006, 2008), but the pattern revealed in our study is more complicated. According to both journalists and sources, most of the agenda is decided by the political system. But how issues are covered, and which side has the initiative in the coverage of these issues, is the result of a complicated interplay. In the descriptions of the processes of collaboration and, in some cases, conflict, the interviews contain both similarities and differences.

How press secretaries work depends in part on which minister they work for. Press secretaries working for the PM or other ministers responsible for important and sensitive areas have to take many questions from journalists and work mostly *reactively*. Press secretaries who work for less-known ministers tend to work more *proactively*,

taking more contact themselves to compete for media attention. In order to achieve positive publicity, different news is provided to different news organisations:

If you work in the government, a lot of things are produced that can be news [...]. [Different] news fits different news organisations; newsrooms have different degrees of interest and we can practically decide that if we do it on TV or radio in the morning, we know that the large newspapers will write about it later during the day and the news will live on. (Swedish press secretary 7)

All press advisors said that news is given to the newsroom where the issue is likely to get the “best treatment”. One of them expressed this part of the work:

We tried to have some kind of balance between newsrooms, not to give the same things to the same media all the time. But of course, some news was better presented in a specific media [...]. And if we have something where we can decide when and how we should present it, why not? (Swedish press secretary 1)

Another press secretary described how the news about a state public inquiry into the welfare system was announced. First, the minister had an article published in DN Debatt (the place for public debate in the large newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*), and the same morning, the minister and another leading politician participated in morning TV to explain the issue. Further, in order for the competing commercial channel, TV4, to make news of the story, information was sent to the newsroom of TV4 in advance, and in the evening the minister was in the largest news show on public service TV.

We succeeded in directing the communication just as we wanted it [...]. We were able to plan the whole communication from the first article in the early morning to the last live-broadcast interview on TV in the evening. (Swedish press secretary 8)

These examples, of course, represent times when press secretaries felt they had full control. In other news stories, they may not have had such control and they may have had to perform some kind of crisis management. However, none of the press secretaries admitted that they had been involved in this kind of crisis, and when they were asked about crises in communication in other parts of the government, they avoided the question. Nevertheless, there is one example showing that some of the methods from the proactive work are also used in handling crises.

In November 2011, Dagens Eko, the public service radio news, disclosed a story on a secret agreement between Sweden and Saudi Arabia for the construction of an arms factory. To make it easier for the minister of defence to give his version, the press advisor consciously bypassed the reporters behind the story and contacted some other journalists at the radio. Moreover, in order to support the minister, the chief press officer at the PMO participated in the press conference held, and afterwards, the chief press officer tried to provide the reporters with background information and explain why this situation was difficult for the government to handle (Bodin & Öhman, 2014).

Other press advisors in our interviews confirmed the active role of this former chief press officer at the PMO. She wanted to decide on the details, i.e. “micromanage”, and she also tried to influence journalists with direct comments. Also, for the issue of the secret agreement with Saudi Arabia, communication staff at the PMO were directly involved in handling the media.

A press advisor in the government from 2014 explained how he tried to influence journalists when news was negative for the minister:

It is about selling things the right way, and talking things down if they are not so serious [...]. Often it is some kind of misunderstanding that leads to something bad [...]; then it is time for background conversations when I phone journalists to tell them what is happening and to explain this is not a big deal, blah blah blah... (Swedish press secretary 3)

But trying to influence a reporter is a very sensitive matter. For journalists, it can be regarded as a threat against their integrity, and it therefore creates strong emotions. One press advisor described a situation when a journalist conducted an interview with the PM and added some questions that had not been mentioned before the interview. When the press advisor discussed this with the journalist afterwards, the journalist reacted strongly:

[The reporter] became really mad and said that I tried to censor him afterwards, but that was not my intention [...]. There was a wild discussion and it ended with threats that he would write this and that [...]. Our communication after this was down to only SMS and he answered: “I don’t want to SMS with you.” (Swedish press secretary 1)

Among the interviewed journalists, the picture was quite similar regarding government press secretaries who actively try to place news in different news organisations. Many of the journalists regarded this kind of information as having become more intense over the last 10-15 years. One reporter in public service gave this version of the trade:

It has become an industry where parties try to place so-called “news” in different media. Sometimes they call us, and other times they call the newspapers, to tell us about their proposals. They call and try to sell the news: “I have a story here I think you would like to do.” Press secretaries do this a lot, and they make an agreement that we can run this story and they will have a press conference later the same day [...]. It is a kind of cooperation [...]. (Swedish journalist 9)

Sometimes, the journalists accept a story just to maintain good contacts with the government. If they refuse, they are afraid of being bypassed the next time. As one of the journalists expressed this dilemma: “If you say no, if you don’t want to have beer with your friend when he is calling you ten times, he will call somebody else.”

This trade puts the journalists in a position of dependence, some of the reporters said. One example is the coverage of the budget proposal. During the weeks leading up to the publication of the proposed state budget, the government leaks exclusive

news from the proposal to different news organisations, and, finally, when the whole proposal is published there is no news left to present. A senior reporter with 25 years of experience described this event:

I hate it! I am so angry about this; it is like a game. It is on the conditions decided by the government [...]. They chose what they think is positive and media writes what they want. They release just as much as they want, and I don't have a chance to get some kind of overview. So I cannot do any broad reporting [...]. I am trapped in this logic and say "yes", even if I should not do so for journalistic reasons [...]. I become part of their PR machine. (Swedish journalist 1)

Another senior reporter had a more pragmatic attitude to this exchange between sources and journalists:

It is a kind of trade where they get the publicity they want, and I get information that is newsworthy. I work in an organisation that survives on the distribution of news, and they work in an organisation that survives on having a positive image. (Swedish journalist 4)

The relationship between journalists and press secretaries seems to be an ongoing interplay. The sources try to control the flow of communication; one of them even describes how strict rules stop other officials from having contact with journalists. With this control, political press advisors try to "buy" publicity by offering exclusive news to leading news media.

Journalists, for their part, may accept the offers with a certain degree of professional mistrust and try to find sources who can provide them with news that is not prepared and "pre-cooked" by communication departments. This was acknowledged by one of the press advisors:

Skilled journalists work on having personal contacts within the parties, and they can bypass gatekeepers like myself [...]. I think they do this to get a broader picture. (Swedish press secretary 9)

Access to the "other side"

For both sides, daily work is very much about access to the other side. It is about physical spaces where journalists and political sources meet; it is about access to information through channels like telephones, text messages and social media platforms. All these kinds of interaction are related to one other. They support one other and make it easier for both sides to exchange the currency in this trade.

In the daily work, there are a number of physical spaces where journalists and political sources meet. These spaces have become increasingly important, as access to government buildings has become more restricted.

One of these spaces is the press conferences (Eriksson et al., 2013; Larsson, 2012). Journalists go to press conferences not only to cover the issue of the day but also to

meet sources and to chat about what is going on in other issues. A reporter in public service put it like this:

You can check what is going on, and they will see that you are there [...]. You can talk in a free and easy manner and ask about things going on, it is no secret meeting, but you can hear things. (Swedish journalist 2)

Another important space is the parliament building, where, during and after debates, wandering reporters may meet politicians. Some news organisations have offices in the parliament building, but reporters say there is less time to spend in the building today. Nonetheless, those who use this space think it is very fruitful:

When you come inside, it is a very open environment. You meet politicians all the time – at the coffee machine and in the lunch restaurant [...]. You get to know a lot, perhaps not what you were supposed to find out, but a lot of other information that can be of great value another day. (Swedish journalist 5)

Congresses and other party activities are also spaces for developing relationships between political sources and journalists. Both the journalists and the press advisors emphasise informal contacts as a basic method for both sides to exchange information and influence publicity. To reach this level of a relationship, both sides have to trust each other, and this trust is developed during a long period of personal contact. One press advisor at the PM explained:

You can have lunch with journalists and then it will be a longer and deeper conversation and you get to know each other better. Then we have those occasions when you see a lot of each other, like congresses or the political week in Almedalen [...] or when journalists follow us on travels [...]. All background conversations build on a relationship, a journalist cannot just phone me and expect a conversation “on background” if I don’t have a relationship with this person. (Swedish press secretary 11)

Another press advisor described these relationships as a form of “symbiosis”, and stressed that it takes time to build the relationships with journalists:

You have to have background conversations, if not you will not understand politics. You have to get close to understand [...]. It takes a while before you gain confidence, and the absolutely best journalists can have many professional background conversations with many people. Some of them have had relationships for 20-30 years that revolve around the background [...] and then you can do real news [...]. It is about confidence from both sides. (Swedish press secretary 2)

Other press advisors commented that background conversations are a way to give journalists more context and to frame the issue in a positive light for the political side. It is also important, though, to realise that everything you say can be used, even if the source is not mentioned.

You should not have any illusions about conversations with journalists about background. You can talk more freely, but what you say can be used [...]. (Swedish press secretary 9)

Informal conversations are also an important way for press advisors to learn more about how journalists think (Davis, 2009). Meeting journalists before an interview with a minister gives the press advisor more knowledge about the angle – the kind of story that the journalist has in mind. One press advisor described these conversations as a way to predict what is coming – to learn how journalists think in order to be able to draw better attention to the minister’s own issues in the reporting.

Among journalists, informal conversations with sources are both a basic working method and a rather sensitive issue. For example, when former political reporter Erik Fichtelius published his background conversations with former PM Göran Persson in 2007, he received a lot of criticism for having had a secret agreement with the PM at a time when he was a reporter covering politics (Fichtelius, 2007).⁴ The agreement between Fichtelius and Persson was that the former was free to use the material as he wanted after Persson had resigned.

Several of the reporters in the interviews talked about informal background conversations with different political sources. The meetings are often held over lunch, but also at other places where they can talk freely. Some of the reporters talked about it, while others were more reluctant. One of the reporters often invited sources to lunch:

We talk about the political situation, about strategies and how they think [...]. I often get ideas from these meetings; I can feel if they are changing their policy or just the way they are talking about issues. (Swedish journalist 3)

SMS – the best communication link

In a country like Sweden, with only a few hundred politicians, press advisors and journalists, the political sphere is quite small, and personal relationships that allow for SMSs and quick calls are important. Face-to-face meetings are not necessary for a close relationship. One reporter said: “I don’t have any need to meet these people, but we talk on the phone and send SMSs and emails.” (Swedish journalist 2)

Many of the reporters mentioned the use of SMSs in their daily contact with sources. It is easy to send a short question, and the source is often able to answer even if they are in a meeting:

If you have contact with a person, you can just send an SMS and ask if something is correct. Have you heard [...]? What will your party say about NATO? [...] I don’t write my name under the message, but they have my number from earlier contact, so they see it is from me. (Swedish journalist 2)

Another reporter said that text messages are more discreet, and that discretion is sometimes preferred:

Sometimes I have to take people aside, to talk where nobody can listen [...]. Sometimes I send an SMS [...]; it can be sensitive for people to talk, they don't want to be seen with me because I am known. So it can be better to send an SMS. I get some news by SMS nowadays. (Swedish journalist 3)

The sources are also aware of this use of SMS during important meetings and news developments. For example, when the Social Democratic Party discussed replacing the leader in January 2012, newspapers could report directly from an ongoing meeting with the help from participants at the meeting. After this, participants were requested to put their mobiles on the table in front of them (Suhonen, 2014).

The press advisors also use their contacts among journalists when they need to handle difficult situations. One press advisor said his work is to minimise the publicity on bad news:

I have tried several times to handle this by contacting journalists via Twitter or SMS [...]. I can offer an interview with the minister in a couple of days or perhaps see that he gets something more instead. (Swedish press secretary 10)

Within a small political universe, the informal web of contacts is the most important tool for both the journalists and the press advisors in their daily work. How this is related to formality and informality is the topic of the following analysis.

Formality and informality in relationships

It is difficult to draw a clear line between formality and informality in relationships (see Chapter 8). When analysing the material collected for this study, attention was given to how the actors themselves perceived the situation. One of the press advisors working directly for the PM rejected the division between the formal and informal in his work:

What could an informal contact be in my work? If I talk to a journalist, it is a formal contact [...]. To talk to journalists, to hand out information and spread the picture we want and the policy we are working for, that is my formal task [...]. In my daily work I have professional relationships [...] and talk to journalists all the time to make them understand how we think. (Swedish press secretary 7)

Another press advisor described how he spends a lot of time with journalists during trips and congresses, and on these occasions they get to know each other more closely. Nevertheless, the relationship is basically professional, and the press advisor emphasised that the talk must not be private and careless. There can be problems, though:

There is a line between background conversations and leaks, and it can be difficult to identify. I don't leak information even if it would help my party in the short run.

[Background] conversation adds one more communication channel for the government, and there is an agreement between the journalists and those politically employed, like me, that this will not be quoted and there will be no names. (Swedish press secretary 11)

One of the press advisors reflected on the fact that contacts can be both formal and informal at the same time. For example, when journalists wait outside the plenary hall of the parliament after a debate, the press advisors sometimes walk around and talk to them just to maintain social relationships. These relationships can be useful in other situations:

Sometimes I have quite difficult discussions, if something is wrong or misunderstood [...]. It is much easier if you already have a good relationship [...]. (Swedish press secretary 1)

For the journalists, there was no need to draw any strict division between formal and informal contacts – both are simply different ways of searching for information. One of the old reporters felt that there were more informal contacts before, when he could move more freely in the government offices. Another reporter said that the informal sources are still important, at least if there is a mutual interest in making some information public. One reporter was very clear about press advisors always doing their job, even if they know each other well. The relationship is basically professional and formal.

Press advisors are not always formal or informal, it is a moving scale all the time [...]. Sometimes you think you have a good, informal contact, but when the questions become hot the relationship clearly becomes formal [...]. So I don't believe in being a kind of friend to a press advisor. (Swedish journalist 9)

Formality and informality are two sides of the same coin in the relationships between journalists and the government. Sometimes the interaction is visible, sometimes it is not. And, importantly, in the time slots that occur during formal proceedings, relationships that can be beneficial to both parties are built and maintained.

Relationships between actors

Informality is very much about relationships, according to both the press advisors and the journalists. They all made it very clear that building relationships is the most important work method. However, it is also important to distinguish between personal and private relationships. In many of the interviews, both the press advisors and the journalists reflected on this difference and how difficult it can be.

The importance of personal relationships was articulated by several press advisors, both senior advisors close to the PM and other interviewees:

[Relationships] are the core of this profession, the ability to build human relationships not only as colleagues but also with journalists [...]. To build external relationships to spread our message [...] requires that we have a relationship somewhere, and it takes longer than you would expect to build these relationships. (Swedish press secretary 2)

Both sides emphasised that the relationships are professional, not private. One press advisor admitted that in a small country like Sweden, there are many close relationships. It might be difficult to keep a relationship solely on one side of the line – “it is all quite mucky, to be really honest”. Another press advisor in the PMO said he has some personal friends working in large newsrooms, but he never phones them, and they never phone him.

One press advisor explained the difference:

I need personal and professional relationships with journalists. But I will never have a *private* relationship with a journalist. It doesn't work that way, and they cannot have private ties to people like me either. They should not have, and I don't imagine they think they have [...]. They have no obligations to me, and my work is to have a good relationship and to give them things [...]. The relationship is professionally symbiotic. I would say they are dependent on us, and we on them [...] but the roles are very clear. (Swedish press secretary 9)

The journalists have many different groups of sources; press advisors are just one of the sources they must have to gain access to the minister. During their daily work, journalists develop different kinds of sources; one of the senior journalists, for example, said that he had had informal discussions on policy issues with a former PM. Other journalists said they had had professional relationships with politicians for years, but that they never met outside work.

For most journalists, it is very important to stress the line between personal and private. One experienced journalist said:

It may never change to a private relationship. Personal relationships are one thing; I mean, you will have a personal relationship with a person you meet over a long period of time. But that is not the same thing as having a private relationship with this person. You have to distinguish between job and privacy. (Swedish journalist 5)

The line between professional and private relations can be difficult to define, and it is sometimes hard to notice when a professional relationship changes to some kind of dependency. Some of the journalists reflected on this – when a professional relationship develops into a kind of symbiosis where the journalist loses critical distance. One journalist talked about the long hours of travel during election campaigns when journalists and politicians “laugh and talk and get to know one other”. This reporter explained:

This kind of relationship is about giving and taking, about being personal [...]. With many of them I have, well, I don't socialise with them, not with anybody, but they know very well who I am and how I live and all that. (Swedish journalist 6)

“Professionally symbiotic” is the term closest to the situation described by both the press advisors and the journalists when it comes to relationships between the two groups. Neither press advisors nor journalists want to mix private friendships and professional contacts; there is a border to the private sphere that is not to be crossed. This might be a problem in a small country such as Sweden, but most of our interviewees seem to think that the situation is not very problematic.

However, the journalists are the ones who seem to have the greatest need to define this border, and they often emphasise their professional role. For them, it is a question of integrity, of being trustworthy in their work, but there is still a “grey zone” of mutual relations where work and private life come close to each other.

Leaks and scandals

The press advisors are important sources when it comes to proactive news management, but the journalists have many additional sources, especially in connection with internal conflicts within parties and coalitions. For example, in January 2012, the chairman of the Social Democratic Party, Håkan Juholt, was forced to resign after intense media coverage of some mistakes in his personal finances. While Juholt’s own actions were the root of his problem, the process was fuelled by political enemies within the party who provided journalists with a steady flow of leaks (Suhonen, 2014).

Some of the press advisors referred to this as a “media scandal”. One of them said this scandal was driven by strong internal critics. He emphasised that he works hard in his position in the ministry to prevent leaks; good internal processes reduce the risk of leaks. Another press advisor with experience from the Social Democratic Party presented the same picture:

I saw a party organisation that was not feeling well and leaking extensively. Immediately after Juholt resigned [...] and the new leadership took over, the leaks stopped. It was an interesting phenomenon, because an organisation not feeling well leaks a lot in all directions. But when it feels a positive energy, a feeling of control and a leadership heading somewhere, the leaks stop. (Swedish press secretary 10)

Journalists emphasise leaks as an important source. In conflicts within parties or coalitions, actors try to use media coverage to strengthen their own position. Sources provide journalists with negative information about their political opponents. One journalist saw this pattern:

Many scandals we see do not come from political enemies or journalists who find something, but rather somebody who is close to the accused politician and not feeling appreciated. This person tells something to a journalist. There are a lot of personal motives behind great news. (Swedish journalist 5)

Other interviewed reporters also regarded leaks as important sources, and they had various methods for protecting their identity and continuing the relationship. However,

they also talked about the fear of being used in internal conflicts. In cases like these, it is important to have other kinds of sources to evaluate the information journalists receive. These kinds of relationships have to be built in advance and rest on a solid base of confidence. One reporter emphasised the knowledge base of the journalist – knowing how to evaluate the information and whom to contact.

These kinds of personal and informal sources are very valuable for journalists: they give insight into closed political processes. This exchange between journalists and sources is also in the interest of both sides. One reporter talked about the internal conflict in the Christian Democratic Party on the question of whether homosexuals should be allowed to adopt children. The reporter had followed this party for years and knew about the groups in the conflict. The reporter knew which persons to contact:

What is special with politicians is that they also have an interest in it. I know it and they know it. They talk not to be nice to me, but because they want to reach out and say they are against these adoptions. It favours them, and it favours me because it will be good news, interesting and relevant, mutual in some way. (Swedish journalist 2)

Both the press advisors and the political journalists consider relationships to be the core of their professions. These relationships are often personal, but not private. There is an invisible but clear line for most of them between personal and private. Mutual confidence and mutual interest are the basis for the relationship. But both sides also know that professional interest comes first, before any personal or private feelings. Therefore, many of the press advisors and journalists stated clearly that they do not mix friendship and professional relationships.

Conclusions: Media logics and political logics

The daily work of political journalists and their political sources is carried out in a small world. Some of the press advisors estimated this “universe” to have only a few hundred inhabitants: top politicians and their political staff, communication officials and less than a hundred political journalists in about ten leading newsrooms. In this small world, a shared culture holds all actors together – a political communication culture based on norms, values and attitudes (Pfetsch, 2014).

Within this culture, there is a daily struggle over the control of information flows. There are daily negotiations on what is newsworthy, what should be published and what should not be published. These negotiations are based on media logic – but this does not mean that the media decides on everything.

Political communication is mediated and the political actors have internalised media logic in their efforts to influence the actual output (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Thus, from the perspective of political actors, media logic is a means to gain influence according to political logic; it is through the skilful use of media logic that influence

on public opinion and political processes is achieved. Thereby, the two kinds of logics are closely linked in a complex pattern of interaction.

In the interviews with the journalists and press advisors, a common picture of these daily relationships became visible:

The professional roles for both journalists and press advisors are very clear. They have developed in a process of professionalisation, first among the journalists and then during the last 20-30 years among the press advisors too. Each group has common standards, mostly tacit values and norms guiding their behaviour in relation to each other.

The most important tool for both groups is a wide web of personal relations. The line between personal and private is mostly clear, and both groups described these relationships as “professional-personal”, not private. Ongoing daily background conversations give both groups insight into the processes – a mutual exchange of background information.

In these relationships, daily negotiations are held on the news value of information distributed from the GO. Journalists seek unique news stories, and sources/press advisors try to make sure “their” issues receive attention and a positive framing. The active party in setting the agenda is often the political side, but journalists have a wide network of sources giving them information on, for example, internal conflicts within parties and governments. In these cases, the source side may have to handle unwanted news.

The various locations for this interaction differ. Access to the government and parliament buildings has been restricted, but other means of communication have developed: mobile phones, SMS and Twitter, for example. Occasions in relation to formal events are important for developing professional-personal relationships.

These playgrounds can be both formal and informal. In a way, all interaction is formal in the sense that it is performed within the professional roles as a kind of role play. Sometimes this role play is visible (e.g., in press conferences and broadcast interviews), but most often it takes place behind the scenes. A large part of the trade is performed in background conversations, hidden communication in SMSs with select sources and other kinds of informal contacts.

A liquid power relation

It is difficult to say which side is the strongest in the relationship between journalists and political sources. Research emphasises the situational character of the power balance between actors (Pfetsch, 2014); often there are common interests in the trade, but sometimes there are conflicts.

By controlling the information, the political sources have a lot of influence on the agenda. News is distributed to select newsrooms, and carefully planned communication gives the sources an advantage in agenda building. Some journalists react to this, but it is difficult to refuse unique news offered by government sources.

When it comes to the framing of news, journalists have more influence than political actors. However, given the underlying threat of not cooperating with newsrooms likely to frame the issues negatively, sources have an indirect influence on the presentation. The power of journalists in this trade also depends on the position of the media outlet in the media landscape – a major TV channel or news agency has a much stronger position in relation to sources than small, niche media. These differences have been observed in earlier research: while sources are the ones with most influence over the agenda, journalists have the upper hand when it comes to how issues are framed (Pfetsch, 2014). However, the study at hand shows that the interviewed sources work very actively to influence the framing, using both soft and hard methods.

While there is no doubt that media logic is the basis for the daily negotiations between journalists and sources, the political side is not a victim of this logic. On the contrary, political actors today use media logic for their own purposes. This is obvious in internal conflicts in parties or coalitions, where leaks to the media are used to combat political opponents.

The return of political parallelism?

In the Nordic countries, relationships between journalists and political sources have been defined as being based on “professional distance” (Moring & Pfetsch, 2014). In the same vein, two characteristics of the overall media system in these countries are professionalisation and a lack of political parallelism (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). This professionalisation on both sides is confirmed in this study, but under this general conclusion some other trends are also visible.

Both sources and journalists described an increase in resources on the political side: today, there are more press advisors, more coordination and more active work in order to influence news reporting. At the same time, actors on both sides told the same story about downsized newsrooms, reporters without the knowledge needed to evaluate information, greater demands to produce content for different platforms and less time for journalistic research.

Taken together, the result is mediated political communication that is more influenced by political sources. By adapting to media logic, political actors increase their influence on political reporting at the expense of the autonomy of professional journalism. In a way, this means a return to political parallelism through the back door. It is not the old version of political parallelism, but a modern type of political instrumentalisation of the media.

Notes

1. In this chapter, we use the terms “press secretary” and “media/press advisor” interchangeably.
2. It is issued by the Office for Administrative Affairs, to which the GO Communications Department belongs.

3. It is issued by the Office of the Permanent Secretary, which belongs to the PMO.
4. One hundred hours of conversations during the ten-year period between 1996 and 2006 were published, both as a book and a three-hour TV documentary.

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