

Chapter 6

Media and politics in Sweden

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Abstract

This chapter introduces political communication in Sweden with a particular focus on the most important developments during the last decade, and we discuss current main actors and structures and the dynamic interplay between voters, politics, and media. Important changes are taking place with regard to the party system, the media system, and voter behaviour, and the current transformations have various causes. On the supply side, no part of the Swedish society is untouched by the new opportunities offered by digitalisation and new media technology. The hybrid media system parallels news media and social media and blurs the lines between information and entertainment. Mass media companies converge to platform neutral digital media companies, and political parties navigate between traditional and digital communication channels in their efforts to reach voters. On the demand side, new media habits and media diets develop, more individual and fragmented than ever before.

Keywords: political communication, Sweden, mediatisation, professionalisation, media system

Introduction

Sweden has changed. It can be argued that the globally known “middle way” country (Childs, 1936), successfully balancing liberalism and social welfare, has now been transformed to a less notable country “somewhere in the middle” in most socioeconomic international rankings. From a political communication perspective, Sweden has traditionally been described as a blended country, successfully mixing liberal ideas of freedom of the press with state interventions to guarantee media pluralism in cases where the market is not able to achieve it. Whether these distinctive features prevail is, however, an open question.

Using the well-known typology from media scholars Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini, Sweden has often been referred to as a typical democratic-corporatist

country, where politics and media-relations have been characterised by a strong mass press, political parallelism, journalistic professionalism, and a vital role of the state (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In a specific overview of Swedish political communication published more than a decade ago, gradual changes within political and media systems were noted, but at the same time country-specific relations between politics, media, and the public were still considered relatively important for political communication developments (Strömbäck & Nord, 2008).

Today, the middle way metaphor has probably become an even more obsolete way to describe contemporary societal developments in Sweden. In some political communication aspects, the country could rather be described as an “extreme case”, for example with regard to digitalisation processes: people’s access to broadband and the use of mobile devices are extremely high in international comparison, and the profile of young audiences’ media use deviates more from other users than in other countries. Furthermore, the hitherto political stability and steady bloc-politics have now been replaced by new alliances across previous ideological borders, increased party fragmentation, and more complex parliamentary scenarios (Nord et al., 2018). Finally, legacy media such as daily newspapers and public service media face several serious challenges in the digital media landscape both with regard to economic and audience developments (Weibull et al., 2018).

The objective of this chapter is threefold. Firstly, we introduce political communication in Sweden with a particular focus on the most important developments during the last decade. Thus, we discuss the current main actors and structures and relevant aspects of the dynamic interplay between voters, politics, and media. Political parties are described with regard to election results, roles in the parliament or government, and structural and strategic communication profiles during election campaigns. Distinctive features of the Swedish political communication system that differ from the other Nordic countries are particularly observed.

Secondly, we address central political communication theories with relevance for these developments with a particular focus on the contemporary trends of mediatisation, professionalisation, and market orientation of political and media actors in Sweden. The merits and shortcomings of these three central theories are analysed, and possible future challenges and changes in media and politics-relations are discussed. Additionally, recent signs of fragmentation of the public sphere, the political system, and the media system are addressed.

Thirdly, we highlight some possible challenges for future political communication research in Sweden. Generally speaking, political communication research in Sweden as well as in other countries is struggling with the relevance of long-established theories of the field in the digital age (e.g., agenda-setting, gatekeeping) (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Furthermore, the most used methodo-

logical approaches in the field (e.g., surveys and content analysis) are not always perfect instruments to catch real-time developments and scattered audience behaviour. From an empirical point of view, political communication research in Sweden probably needs to widen the analytical perspective from the “usual suspects” – voters, parties, and media – to include other important actors (e.g., lobbyists, influencers, and alternative media). Last, but not least, it is relevant to address the risks with the ongoing internationalisation of political communication research encouraging more studies of Sweden as an interesting case in international comparison, but at the same time offering less substantial and comprehensive analyses of specific conditions of Swedish political communications with great societal relevance.

Old democracy faces new political challenges

Sweden celebrated 100 years of democracy in December 2018. In 1918, a majority in the parliament decided to suggest universal suffrage in the country. However, the celebration activities were partly overshadowed by the current political crisis and the very long process to form a new government due to the complicated parliamentary situation after the outcome of the national elections in September 2018. There were, of course, very good reasons to remember 100 years of societal progress and democratic stability. But at the same time, the contemporary political situation illustrated new challenges facing the old democracy. More than 100 days of forming a new government was definitely more widely discussed than 100 years of democratic conditions.

The electoral system in Sweden is strictly proportional with a 4 per cent threshold for receiving seats in parliament. Voters use party list ballots with a possibility to mark one single candidate they prefer, but most votes are still based on sole party preferences. In contrast to all other Nordic countries, since 1970, Swedes vote every fourth year on national, regional, and local level on the same day. Additionally, there are elections to the European Parliament every fifth year (Bäck et al., 2015). This makes election campaigns rare, and Sweden has been referred to as the country in Europe where voters go to polling stations least frequently.

This electoral system has some obvious consequences. First of all, the national electoral campaign overshadows campaigns on lower administrative levels, which means that regional and local issues are somewhat neglected in media coverage and public debate during the election campaign. National party leaders are often more well known than local leaders by the public. Second, the system seems to promote voter turnout. Most people vote in all the three elections when they go to the polling stations, and thus voter turnout is remarkably high in Sweden, also on regional and local levels. On the national level, voter turnout

has increased in every election since 2002, and 87.2 per cent of the electorate voted in the national elections in 2018. However, voter turnout in the European Parliament elections is still much lower but reached an all-time high in 2019, with a voter turnout of 53.3 per cent of eligible voters (Bolin et al., 2019).

The party system in Sweden has historically been described as one of the most stable in the world, with the same five political parties represented in the parliament between 1918 and 1988, and with the Social Democrats in an almost hegemonic position, ruling the country for 42 years from 1934 to 1976. Political conflicts have regularly been based on left–right-wing ideological positions, but it is important to note that party politics in general and over time have been characterised more by policy compromises and agreements on single issues than by conflicting ideological struggles (Hadenius, 1996). However, relatively new political parties such as the Green Party, the Christian Democrats, New Democracy, and the Sweden Democrats have emerged on the national political scene since 1988, and the success of new parties on the regional and local level is even more evident. The party system has become more fragmented than ever, and power relations between the parties have changed (Bäck et al., 2015; Bäck & Hellström, 2018).

The long-time dominance of the Social Democrats in party politics – perhaps more notable than in any other Nordic country – is now definitely broken. The party is still the biggest in Sweden with 28 per cent of the votes in the 2018 national elections. More interesting is the fact that this is the lowest figure for the biggest party in parliament ever. Another historical record since 2018 is that the two major parties in recent decades, the Social Democrats and the Moderates, together do not reach a majority of the seats in parliament. The nationalist-conservative party, the Sweden Democrats, entered the parliament in 2010 with 5.6 per cent of the votes. In 2018, they received 17.6 per cent of the votes and are currently the third largest party in the Swedish Parliament (Nord et al., 2018). Table 6.1 shows the election results and voter turnout in the five latest national elections.

Party system changes reflect changing conflict patterns in the Swedish society. Traditional social conflicts between left and right positions – distributions of welfare, taxation, and jobs – still exist and play an important role. But they exist together with other conflict dimensions that sometimes tend to be more controversial and dominate public debate. One such dimension is the conflict between economic growth and sustainable environment, where increasing worries for climate change influence party politics. The most important new conflict dimension is, however, the increasing tension between nationalism and globalism, most intensively expressed in the debate about immigration. In the aftermath of the big migration flows to Europe in the autumn of 2015, Sweden received more refugees per capita than any other country on the continent. Immigration became a major topic in Swedish politics, and the only party at that

Table 6.1 National election results and voter turnout in Sweden, 2002–2018 (per cent)

	2002	2006	2010	2014	2018
Centre Party	6.2	7.9	6.6	6.1	8.6
Christian Democrats	9.1	6.6	5.6	4.6	6.3
Liberals	13.4	7.5	7.0	5.4	5.5
Green Party	4.6	5.2	7.3	6.9	4.4
Moderates	15.3	26.2	30.1	23.3	19.8
Social Democrats	39.9	35	30.7	31	28.3
Sweden Democrats	1.4	2.9	5.7	12.9	17.5
Left Party	8.4	5.8	5.6	5.7	8
Voter turnout	80.1	82	84.6	85.8	87.2

Source: Valmyndigheten, n.d.

time with a restrictive immigration policy, the Sweden Democrats, managed to set the political agenda for the forthcoming years.

The continuous electoral successes of the Sweden Democrats have reshaped the political landscape and made government coalitions less foreseeable (Bäck & Hellström, 2018). In contrast to other Nordic countries, the right-wing nationalist populist party has been isolated by all other political parties, mainly because of its historical roots in neo-Nazism and racist movements. This parliamentary situation made it more difficult than ever to form effective governments, as the only way to prevent the Sweden Democrats from influence was to find new alliances across previous ideological borders. As the result, a minority government of Social Democrats and Greens was formed in January 2019, after four months of negotiations and with support from two former political opponents, the Liberals and the Centre Party.

The main reason behind party fragmentation is changing political preferences within the Swedish electorate. The most significant development with regard to voter behaviour is not a single drift towards left or right, but the overall increasing volatility that makes politics more unpredictable. Predispositions and party alignments seem to be of less importance, and voting decisions are taken later during the campaign. In 2018, a record number of 41 per cent of the electorate voted for another party than they did four years before. About one-third of the electorate made their decision during the campaign and one-fifth during the very last week of the campaign. In many cases, voters' new preferences are within the same group of parties as before, but an increasing number of voters also jump from one political camp to the other side of the political spectrum. It is also quite common to split the votes in national, regional, and local elections. About one-fourth of the electorate normally split their votes on election day (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016).

The volatility certainly reflects different public perceptions of politics. First of all, it is a result of decreased party membership and party identification. A

very small group of citizens – around 2 per cent – are still members of a political party, and the majority of Swedish voters do not single out any specific party that they generally identify themselves with in contrast to other parties. These figures have been going down for a very long time and contribute to a political reality where a majority of voters are relatively openminded in their final voting decisions. Traditional class-based and generational voting still exists, but individual preferences are becoming more important (Karlsson & Lundberg, 2015; Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016).

Second, mistrust of politicians and political institutions in Sweden weakens steady party preferences; about 50 per cent of citizens express “some” or “a lot of” mistrust in political actors (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). Furthermore, government parties in Sweden have regularly faced defeats in upcoming elections, while parties with no political responsibility have generally been more successful (Strömbäck, 2013). Still, it is important to note that citizens, despite political mistrust, seem to have considerable faith in the democratic system as a whole. A solid majority thinks democracy works well, and voter turnout figures are impressively high in international comparisons. Consequently, it may be relevant to describe Sweden as a “cool” democracy where citizens have little passion for political parties and regular personal involvement in political work, but do get mobilised during election campaigns and find it more or less a civic duty to cast their votes on election day.

Reaching the voter in many more ways

These very significant political conditions – electoral volatility and high voter turnout – make party campaign communications extremely important, as there is much at stake in every election for every party. It is not possible for a single party to get all of the undecided voters, but a successful campaign can definitely be of great importance for the electoral outcome. There are also many indicators of changes of political party communications in recent election campaigns, both with regard to structures and strategies.

Contemporary election campaigns in Sweden are not arenas for amateurs, generalists, or idealists. On the contrary, campaigns are to a large extent managed by professional experts in distinctive areas of communication such as advertising, media management, polling, databases, or social media. In a comparative perspective, party campaign budgets have increased year by year. In 2018, the eight parties in the parliament together spent more than SEK 300 million on their campaign activities, and about 50 per cent of their budgets were advertising costs. This was even more than during the “super election year” of 2014, when both general elections and European Parliament elections were held.

However, party communications are not only developing because of financial and personal resources. Another significant trend is the increase of strategic considerations in the selection of communication channels and platforms and the more frequent use of feedback from voters, using tracking polls, focus groups, and other methods. (Nord & Strömbäck, 2018).

For a long time, the Swedish electoral campaign context was mainly journalist controlled. News programmes, television debates, and party leader hearings were perceived as the highlights of the campaign (Esaïasson & Håkansson, 2002). In recent years, the combination of downsized newsrooms and more efficient government communication and news management may have changed the balance in favour of political sources (K. M. Johansson et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the increased importance of the Internet and social media changes the relationship between political parties and journalists. In all recent election campaigns, there has been speculations around when social media will take over as the single most important communication tool (Findahl, 2014; Nord et al., 2018). However, this has not happened, and social media are still supplementing rather than replacing traditional news media in election campaigns. On the other hand, digital and social media are undoubtedly becoming increasingly important for political communications as more and more people regularly use the new platforms for every election (Grusell & Nord, 2016; cf. Barrling & Holmberg, 2018).

From a party perspective, social media make it easier to communicate directly with the voter without relying on traditional media. The party use of social media as a new form of communication channel has expanded fast and has been increasingly integrated in the campaign toolbox during recent election campaigns. Today, social media are used by Swedish parties both as a refined tool for communication in the election movement and as a tool for reaching specific groups such as journalists and certain voter groups. All parties, regardless of party size and ideological perspectives, have been working intensively with social media during the last decade. The basic function of social media has been to facilitate communication between party members and arouse interest in different political activities but also to be a channel for mobilising nuclear voters and reaching out to new groups of voters (Bjereld et al., 2018; Grusell & Nord, 2016).

Until the national elections in 2014, all political parties claimed that news media were the most important campaign communication channel. During the election campaign in 2018, however, Facebook was perceived as the single most important communication channel, slightly more important than television news. Table 6.2 shows the party ranking of different communication channels in recent election campaigns.

Table 6.2 *Party perceptions of communication channels' importance in national elections, 2010–2018 (mean values)*

	2010	2014	2018
Facebook	4.1	4.5	4.7
TV news	4.6	4.8	4.4
Direct mail	3.5	4.4	3.9
Newspapers	4.6	4.4	3.7
Radio news	4.5	4.2	3.7
Party website	4.6	4.5	3.4
Blogs	4.4	2.8	3.3
Posters	3.6	4.0	3.1
Party desks	4.1	4.1	3.1
Canvassing	3.0	2.5	3.0
TV ads	3.5	3.5	2.6
Internet banners	2.9	3.8	2.3

Comments: Communication channels were ranked by campaign managers on a five-point scale (1 = not important at all; 5 = very important); *N* = 8.

Source: Bolin et al., forthcoming

However, using social media effectively in order to reach the voters during election campaigns is not easy. For politicians who want to use social media to reach their voters, there are many pitfalls – Twitter is a good illustration of this. The national elections of 2010 were predicted, more than any previous election campaign, to be played out online and in social media, but for several different reasons this did not occur, primarily as politicians and political parties were not yet willing to “let go of the microphone”. Tweeting was largely a monologue instead of a dialogue (Grusell & Nord, 2012; cf. Small, 2011); for instance, a study by Larsson and Moe (2012) indicates that only a small proportion of political opinion-makers accounted for a very large number of tweets. Twitter seemed to act as a new channel for voices that already belonged to an elite or had high positions in the media and political life. Another observation was that Twitter was primarily used for giving out information rather than a way of conducting dialogue. Larsson and Moe (2012) say that their study indicates that if the use of Twitter had some effect, it was minimal. Twitter remained a marginal phenomenon even in the 2014 and 2018 elections.

This connection between party campaigns and media features brings us to taking a closer look at the Swedish media system that has undergone dramatic and significant changes in recent decades.

A competitive and crowded media landscape

The Swedish media system has been described as somewhat of an archetype of a democrat corporatist model with a highly developed newspaper market,

a tradition of political parallelism, a high degree of journalistic professionalism, and with considerable state interventions in the media system (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). At the same time, a transformation process is evident, where newspaper markets face increased competition from global actors and the traditional links between political parties and media have weakened significantly.

From a media theory perspective, the Swedish media system is still a mixture between classical liberal ideas of the press as an independent fourth estate, and social responsibility ideas concerning the necessity for state interventions in order to maintain diversity and provide journalism produced for public good (Allern & Pollack, 2016). Direct press subsidies to the increasing number of newspapers with low market shares and strong public service media remain as cornerstones of Swedish media policy, even if critique from the private media sector and right-wing politicians against this policy tends to increase (Nord & Ots, 2019). Since 2019, press subsidies are part of a new platform-independent media subsidy system, where support to news media in regions with low media presence is included.

During the last decades, the Swedish media landscape has become highly digitalised and undergone considerable changes as commercial radio and television channels, free tabloid newspapers, and the Internet and social media have been introduced (Weibull et al., 2018). The digital media landscape can be described as more competitive and crowded; the supply of diverse media channels has increased significantly; media choices are more individual and usage patterns become more fragmented. Former mass media such as printed newspapers and broadcast radio and television still attract a huge audience, but are gradually losing terrain, especially in younger generations of the population (Ohlsson, 2019).

The Swedish newspaper market is changing dramatically and facing serious economic challenges (Weibull et al., 2018). Advertising revenues are moving from national newspapers to global giants like Facebook and Google, and the willingness to pay for news is declining, as news is free on many digital platforms. Media ownership is becoming more concentrated, and the number of journalists and newsrooms is decreasing, not least on the local level (Truedson, 2018). Paywalls and premium or plus content are countermeasures from the newspaper industry, and a few leading national media companies are still making good business, but the overall future looks gloomy. Readership figures may look impressive in international comparison but are declining.

Sweden, as well as the other Nordic countries, was once referred to as “the heartland” of public service media (Lowe & Steemers, 2012). But the latest decades have seen a deregulation of broadcast media and increased competition between public service media – financed by licence fees, taxes, or both – and commercial media, financed by advertisements and subscriptions. Furthermore, competition has grown in the digital era, when public

service and private media appear on the same digital platforms and when barriers between, text, audio, and visuals have vanished. The new situation has fuelled the debate about public service remit and their possible “market distortions” (Nord, 2016; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Since 2010, Sweden has agreed to implement a public value test regarding all new public service activities that need to be checked with regard to public service value and market impact (Wormbs, 2011).

However, public service radio and television stations continue to be major players in the Swedish media system. In both linear television and linear radio, public service maintains the market-leading position in terms of aggregate audience shares. In 2018, Sweden’s public service television accounted for 35 per cent of the traditional television daily viewing in the country. The equivalent proportion for Sweden’s public service radio was 75 per cent (Facht & Ohlsson, 2019). Some key figures of media use trends in Sweden are displayed in Table 6.3.

Table 6.3 Some key figures on media use trends in Sweden, 2010–2018 (per cent)

	2010	2014	2018
Daily newspaper readership	75	67	55
Public radio audience market share	69	79	75
Public TV audience market share	35	35	35
Daily Internet use	76	83	88
Daily social media use	35	48	71

Comments: The table shows the share of the whole population that every day reads a newspaper, uses the Internet, or uses social media. Public media audience share is the share of total daily listener or viewer time.

Source: Ohlsson, 2019

A truly digital society

Since the introduction of the Internet, the boundaries of both radio and television have become increasingly unclear. The movement from traditional to digital media is moving at a rapid pace. In 2017, more than 80 per cent of the Swedes had a smartphone and over 60 per cent had a reading tablet. In addition to this, 56 per cent had a subscription to a streaming video on demand (SVoD) service for film, series, or sports. The media consumption through the Internet is increasing, where, for example, Netflix is the market leader in SVoD in Sweden today. In the ad-financed part of the market, YouTube enjoys a corresponding special position (Ohlsson, 2018).

The usage of social media has in a short timespan gone from being part of the private sphere to becoming a natural part in the public conversation. In Sweden, access to and use of the Internet and social media is very high. Overall,

Swedes can be described as an increasingly digitised people. Virtually everyone uses the Internet, from a young age to retirement. The use of broadband via fibre at home is increasing, and more than half of Swedish households are connected to the Internet via fibre. The most common way of using the Internet daily, however, is via mobile phone. For young Swedes, aged between 16–25, there is a 100 per cent use of smartphones (Davidsson et al., 2018).

When the Swedes rank the most important sources of information on a five-point scale, the Internet now receives the highest average value for the first time: 3.7 compared with 3.5 for television and 3.2 for newspapers (Davidsson & Findahl, 2016). Public interest in seeking information about elections on the Internet has also increased. During the 2018 Swedish election campaign, more voters than ever turned to the Internet for political information. This trend was particularly strong among first-time voters. However, television was still perceived as the single most important source of information prior to the election by most voters: 73 per cent of the voters considered television as an important or a very important communication channel, while 41 per cent said the same about websites. Among social media, Facebook was considered the most important source of information (19%), Twitter came in second (12%), and YouTube ranked third (9%) (The Swedish Internet Foundation, 2018).

The most widespread social media platforms are spread across several age and education groups, but generally, the networks are dominated by young people (Davidsson & Thoresson, 2017). But there are also gender differences in usage patterns and differences between people in varying life stages (Findahl, 2013). Currently, the most popular social media platform in Sweden is Facebook, followed by Instagram (Davidsson et al., 2018). Although Facebook currently dominates in terms of social media, it is not certain that the company will hold this position in the future – this will be determined by the users. There is every reason to believe that users will move to other social networks if they are perceived as more attractive.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that young children's use of the Internet continues to grow: 79 per cent of Swedish toddlers use the Internet, primarily for watching television and videos. By six years of age, 98 per cent use the Internet. In school, it is common to use the Internet both to seek information and as a part of schoolwork. YouTube is the most common service – virtually all young people under 25 years old use YouTube, a large majority of them daily (Davidsson et al., 2018).

Of the Internet users, 77 per cent use play services, half have a subscription to Netflix, and two-thirds listen to music on Spotify. Almost everyone uses Internet banking – the use of mobile Bank ID (a citizen identification and authentication solution) is increasing each year – and 71 per cent of Internet users have the app Swish (a mobile payment system). Additionally, e-commerce is a well-established way to buy goods: Almost all Internet users between the

ages 26 and 55 have bought objects via the Internet that have been delivered by mail (Davidsson et al., 2018).

To sum up, digitalisation processes are rapidly changing media habits and the use of media for political communications. This makes it relevant to ask whether traditional theoretical approaches to studying political communication in Sweden still matter.

Three central theories become less central

Three theoretical perspectives – mediatisation, professionalisation, and market-orientation processes – stand out as the most central when analysing contemporary Swedish election campaigns (Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). Mediatisation processes are confirmed on different levels: media are the most important source of political information for most people, media organisations are increasingly independent from political institutions, media coverage is more driven by media logic than political logic, and political actors tend to adopt to this media logic in their efforts to catch public attention (Esser & Strömbäck, 2014). Media content analyses of Swedish election campaigns and referendum campaigns have been conducted since 1979, and generally confirm that mediatisation is a useful theory for understanding shifting power relations in political communication over time (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; B. Johansson & Truedson, 2017).

Professionalisation processes appear both in political parties and media institutions. External experts and consultants are hired for specific tasks, more money is spent in the campaign (especially on advertising), more sophisticated tools are developed for analysing public opinion, and campaign strategies are more coherent and parts of permanent campaigning perspectives (Gibson & Römmele, 2009; Kioulos et al., 2015). At the same time, political journalism develops in similar ways. Election campaign coverage is generally well planned and following news department strategies. News coverage is characterised by professional news values and intentions to set the political agenda, not just mirroring political standpoints and controversies. Professional political journalism is both an arena for political debate and an independent actor trying to influence and direct this debate (Asp, 1986; Nygren, 2015). Content of political journalism in national news media is more often guided by structural bias than ideological bias. Winners and losers are picked in game-framed contexts, but political actors' positions vary over time. Professional considerations play a more important role in newsroom work than do political orientations (Asp & Bjerling, 2014; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018).

Finally, market orientation is a feature of political communication processes in Sweden, but perhaps not as evident as the other trends. Market orientation is, put simply, about attracting the largest shares of the audience or electorate

as possible. The media system has certainly become more market oriented; competition for audiences and advertisers between private, public, and global actors are tougher than ever. Mass media perspectives are increasingly obsolete in a digital media world where media diets are becoming more individual and fragmented and media choices are almost unlimited (Chadwick, 2013; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

The Swedish party system is not market oriented to the same extent yet. Policy positions are not mainly explained by a willingness to adopt to public opinion trends or attitudes of specific target groups. On the contrary, political ideology and well-established views on political issues are central in public debate, even if political parties do their best to package and frame their ideas and policy positions in order to make them as favourable as possible for potential voters. Signs of market orientation in politics sometimes appear, and results of internal opinion polls can make parties reframe their standpoints to some extent. Still, overall party politics are more about selling (convincing) than marketing (adjusting) (Lees-Marshment, 2001; Nord & Strömbäck, 2018).

The emphasis on these three processes of central importance for political communication is motivated by empirical observations of recent election campaigns, but does not exclude other perspectives or changes of their importance in the future. It may be argued that the processes of mediatisation, professionalisation, and market orientation are all consequences of a more general transformation of political communication conditions in terms of individualisation and fragmentation. The increased voter dealignment and volatility among the electorate make election outcomes less predictable (Oscarsson & Holmberg, 2016). There is much to gain from a successful campaign, and political parties therefore use professional methods and tools and try to get media exposure. It is plausible to assume that changing voter behaviours and attitudes are the main driving forces behind party professionalisation, mediatisation, and market orientation. In similar patterns, more independent voters and decreased party identification have facilitated media system trends towards more professional and active news journalism, media logic perspectives, and commercial audience orientation.

There is no doubt that the trends of mediatisation, professionalisation, and market orientation will be important in more election campaigns to come in Sweden. There are, however, signs of possible disruptions or changes that may affect all of these processes. For example, news media dominance of the public sphere cannot be taken for granted as social media platforms are increasingly used, also during election campaigns (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016). Accordingly, mediatisation patterns may be more complex and based on more unpredictable interactions between news media and social media agendas and discourses. Some arguments support the idea that social media are becoming more central in this development, as they may be used effectively by political parties for direct and unedited communication with voters, and as they are

most widely used and appreciated by younger generations. Empirical observations of recent elections campaign suggest that political parties do not yet fully use the interactive potential of social media, and mainly perceive these as just another channel for uni-directional messages (Bjereld et al., 2018). While it is not realistic to assume that social media will replace news media as the main source for political information in forthcoming years, it can be expected that social media logics and structures – that differ in many ways from news media – are gradually becoming more important for the understanding of why political discourse is as it is (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Klinger & Svensson, 2015; Olsson & Eriksson, 2016).

Professionalisation trends are challenged in the media sector by decreasing resources for news departments and commercial pressure on regional and local newspapers (Nielsen, 2015). At the same time, the increased use of user-generated content blurs the line between media producers and media consumers. Hyperlocal media with less professional orientations expands, social media platforms become more important, and so-called alternative media, with more extreme political positions, emerge (Holt, 2016; Nygren et al., 2018). And perhaps most importantly, the increased possibilities to measure digital journalism impact in terms of audience sharing and clicking may decrease the importance of traditional news values and professional considerations in newsroom work and encourage audience-centred perspectives (Hanusch, 2017; Petre, 2018).

For political parties, professionalisation has always been a two-sided coin. Historically, all parties in Sweden are becoming more professionalised, regardless of size and ideological positions (Nord & Strömbäck, 2018). There is no sign of a return to more ad hoc–designed campaigns, and even more sophisticated tools and devices can be expected for the future. Still, professionalisation has never been a single key to electoral success (Moring et al., 2011). There is no clear correlation between professional campaigns and election results. On the contrary, successful parties sometimes conduct unprofessional campaigns. It is worth noting that some recent campaigns, such as Donald Trump's in the US in 2016, generally have been perceived as less professional but more emotional and appealing to voters' values (Allen & Parnes, 2017).

Similarly, market-orientation of political parties does not always guarantee success. It may work best for bigger, catch-all parties, who want to expand their base of possible voters. But smaller parties can have more success in profiling themselves as niche parties and sticking to specific values and thus be perceived as ideologically strong and convincing by certain segments of the electorate. It has also been claimed that too much market orientation of politics may be less appreciated in the Swedish political culture. When it comes to the media system, it is more difficult to see any countertrends, as there are no major signs of less-competitive media markets in general. On the margin, some media out-

lets may focus on more idealistic values of investigative journalism, targeting sub-audiences with such preferences.

Thus, established political communication theories generally still have explanatory value when analysing relations between parties, media, and voters in Sweden. At the same time, recent developments in terms of digitalisation of media markets and fragmentation of the public sphere impose huge challenges for future research. The following section of this chapter addresses this topic further and adds some other aspects to this discussion.

Future challenges and directions of research

Political communication studies in Sweden have always been overshadowed by election studies focused on voter behaviour and party preferences among the electorate. The behavioural approach in political science was introduced at a very early stage, first by legendary political scientist Herbert Tingsten and later by a group of scholars in Gothenburg, initially led by Professor Jörgen Westerståhl. The very first systematic analysis of elections and voter behaviour started in 1958; thus, Sweden has among the most impressive longitudinal studies of voters and elections in the world. To a large extent, these studies also cover central political communication themes, even if they are traditionally more associated with political science.

Other aspects of political communication, such as election campaign communications and media coverage of election campaigns, have always existed but are growing in number in recent decades. Election campaigns are now systematically covered from different perspectives and with an increasing interest in the different roles of social media in political communication. However, studies of other actors outside the classical campaign context – such as lobbyists, influencers, and alternative media, just to mention a few – have to some extent been neglected compared to analyses of the interplay between voters, news media, and party politics. As contemporary political communication takes place in many arenas in society and beyond the election-campaign context (e.g., permanent campaigning), there is a need for more research with a broader approach to opinion formation processes and effects. Such approaches should include interest in new areas of political communication, for example, interactions based on emotional rather than rational aspects, and the non-politicisation of politics in terms of personalisation and privatisation trends, not least in social media.

Another challenge is imposed by the fact that political communication in Sweden, as most other social sciences, has become much more integrated in the international academic community and its traditions. There are obvious advantages with this process; publishing in peer reviewed international academic journals secures high quality of research and working in international research

networks facilitates understanding of country-specific contexts when these are put in international systematic comparisons. However, there is also a risk that the dominating paradigm of internationalisation in political communication leads to less interest for academic works that are highly interesting on the national level, but less attractive for international publishing and the individual academic career. For example, the total dominance of doctoral dissertations based on previously published international articles results in less monographs of typical Swedish phenomena. Ten years ago, it was perceived as a great problem that most Nordic political communication scholars produced their work in native languages and did not reach the international research community (Strömbäck et al., 2008). This problem hardly exists anymore; the problem is rather the lack of works that are nationally relevant.

Finally, it is worth adding that some of the challenges in Sweden are similar to those in many other countries. All over the world, academics in this field must deal with both theoretical and methodological challenges. Well-established central theories in the field, such as gatekeeping and agenda-setting, may still be of relevance, but are also regularly disputed in the light of the ongoing digitalisation and media development and increased media use fragmentation processes (cf. Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Davis, 2019). Additionally, traditional social science methods such as surveys and content analysis may be less accurate to catch these digital media developments. There is definitely a need for more innovative scientific methods based on new technology, such as real-time measurements and systematic analyses of metric data.

Conclusion

When trying to summarise recent political communication developments in Sweden, it is obvious that important changes are taking place with regard to party system, media system, and voter behaviour. The current transformations have various causes. On the supply side, no part of the Swedish society is untouched by the new opportunities offered by digitalisation and new media technology. The hybrid media system parallels news media and social media and blurs the lines between information and entertainment and between private chats and public discussion. Mass media companies converge to platform-neutral digital media companies, and political parties navigate between traditional and digital communication channels in their efforts to reach voters. On the demand side, new media habits and media diets develop, more individual and fragmented than ever before. Electoral volatility is certainly a driving force in the development of campaign communications.

So, is there still a Swedish model of political communication? Do distinctive national or Nordic features prevail, or are they more or less replaced by global

and transnational trends? The answer to these questions is to a large extent in the eye of the beholder and depends on the perspective. In a national perspective, the abovementioned changes look very significant and indicate that political communication conditions have been drifting in a direction that makes Sweden look more like other countries. Parties become more professionalised, media more commercialised, and voters more volatile. However, in an international comparison, Sweden still stands out on a wide range of important factors, such as high voter turnout, high newspaper reach, strong public service media, and high level of digitalisation in almost all segments of the population. The most correct answer is perhaps that the current “middle way” goes in a slightly more international direction than ten years ago.

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