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# Media-driven Men and Media-critical Women? An Empirical Study of Gender and MPs' Relationships with the Media in Norway and Sweden

Toril Aalberg and Jesper Strömbäck

## Abstract

This study is an investigation of how members of the Norwegian and the Swedish parliaments relate to and perceive their relationships with the media. Based on surveys conducted among members of the Norwegian *Storting* and the Swedish *Riksdag*, we find that male MPs have more frequent and somewhat less formal relationships with media and journalists compared with female MPs. The results also suggest that male MPs have adapted to the media and their logic more than female MPs. Female MPs also appear to be more critical towards the requirements imposed on politicians who want to get media exposure, compared with male MPs. Analysis reveals that gender differences are smaller among Swedish than Norwegian MPs.

## Keywords

gender, media logic, mediated politics, members of parliament, political communication culture

## Introduction

Modern politics is mediated politics (Bennett and Entman, 2001) in which the media constitute the most important source of information and interpretation. It is therefore crucial for politicians to be visible in the media. British MPs have even observed that voters do not believe they work for the constituency's interest unless they have a prominent media profile (Ross and Sreberny, 2000). This suggests that what matters most is not reality per se, but the social constructions of reality shaped by media coverage (Nimmo and Combs, 1983).

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## Corresponding author:

Toril Aalberg, Department of Sociology and Political Science, NTNU, Trondheim, Norway  
[email: toril.aalberg@svt.ntnu.no]

Politicians' relationships with and attitudes towards the media thus influence their public visibility and hence their chances to make an impact on politics. From this perspective, the issue of gender representation is also important, not least because scholars have documented that the sources on which journalists rely are typically middle-aged *men* with power (Allern, 2001a; Olsen, 1980) while women are under-represented as news sources. This holds true both for general media coverage and for the coverage of politics (Eide, E, 1991, 2000; 2001; Høidahl, 2004).

While a number of studies have examined how the media treat male and female politicians, there has been little examination of politicians' attitudes towards the media and how these attitudes vary by gender. Hence, we do not know if female politicians are more reserved and skeptical towards journalists than male politicians. Neither do we know if publicity-seeking is more widespread among male politicians compared with their female colleagues. As politicians' attitudes and relationships towards the media might be an important antecedent of the under-representation of female political sources in the media coverage, this relationship is worthy of more scholarly attention than it has received to date.

Given this background, the purpose of this study is to investigate how male and female MPs in Norway and Sweden relate to and perceive their relationships with journalists and the media. A key focus is on possible gender differences on this issue, as well as possible differences between Norway and Sweden. The countries were chosen based on the most similar systems-design (Przeworski and Teune, 1970). The similarities and differences between them with respect to gender equality are detailed below. Further, it may be noted that they constitute highly similar cases with respect to political and media systems (Strömbäck and Aalberg, 2008). The study is based upon a survey conducted among Norwegian and Swedish MPs in the period 2007–2008.

## Gender and Politics – the Scandinavian Case

In many democracies, gender equality has become an ideal in mainstream political discourse. Nevertheless, there are substantial differences among countries, and political spheres within countries, as to the extent of gender equality. Norway and Sweden are two countries in which gender equality has long been high on the political agenda. Hernes (1987) even coined the phrase 'state feminism' to describe the Scandinavian ambition to foster gender equality by means of state intervention.

In the political sphere, this commitment has led to a remarkable increase in the participation and representation of women in politics. Scandinavian coverage of politics is also more gender-equal compared with many other areas, for example, business news. It is also probable that there is greater gender political equality compared with the situation in the Anglo-Saxon countries, where most research on treatment by female candidates in the media has been conducted. In Norway, the share of female politicians as sources in the most important television evening news has been about 33 percent over the last few years (Høidahl, 2006). In Sweden during the period 1990–2004, about 25 percent of sources in the three most important television evening news programs were female (Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007).

In 2007, the Norwegian cabinet was the second most gender-equal cabinet among advanced industrialized democracies with 52.6 percent female ministers. Only Finland ranked higher. Sweden ranked third with 45.5 percent. In comparison, 18.2 and 21.7 percent of cabinet members were women in the USA and the UK, respectively (Bale and van Biezen, 2008: 881). Sweden and Norway also have a very large share of female MPs. According to a world ranking by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2009), Sweden is number 2 on the list with 47 percent female MPs, while

Norway ranks number 12 with 36 percent female MPs. The world average is 18.5 percent. Hence, the Norwegian and Swedish cases offer a critical test for analyzing whether there are gender inequalities in the relationships that MPs have with the media.

Despite major similarities, comparative research has revealed important national differences among Scandinavian countries' political approaches to gender equality (Bergqvist and Borchorst, 1999; Dahlerup, 2006; Göransson, 2006; Skjeie and Teigen, 2003; Skjeie and Teigen 2005). As noted by Langvasbråten (2008: 37), a prominent feature of Swedish discourse is the tendency to understand and articulate gendered inequalities as a societal problem, deeply embedded in social structures, that is, a specifically 'gender-power system' that constantly (re)produces gendered hierarchies, both symbolic and material ones. By contrast, Norwegian gender equality discourse has been strongly influenced by utility arguments. In Norwegian politics, gendered inequalities are more frequently seen as a result of individual choice and utility.<sup>1</sup> The typical Norwegian argument in favor of gender equality would be that women are a resource for society because they are different from men, whereas in Sweden 'women as a group are claimed to be subordinate to men, due to the structural reproduction of persistent gendered hierarchies' (Langvasbråten, 2008: 38). Langvasbråten (2008: 37) thus emphasizes that although the Scandinavian countries constitute similar cases, they 'do not represent a case of sameness.'

If the notions of a 'gender-power system that one should try to avoid' versus the 'equal but different approach' affect politicians' media relations, we can expect a broader variation between male and female MPs in Norway than in Sweden. Looking at the number of female MPs, we can also expect a higher level of gender equality in Sweden than in Norway.

## Politicians' Dependence on the Press

During recent decades, the relationship between media and politics has changed considerably in both Norway (Bjørklund, 1991; Østbye, 1997) and Sweden (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull, 2008; Petersson et al., 2006). As in many other Western democracies, the media have become less dependent on political institutions and actors and more influential in opinion formation processes while political actors and institutions have become more dependent on the media in their efforts to shape public opinion (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999). This has been described as a process of mediatization (Hjarvard, 2008; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008).

While it used to be the case that the media were subordinate to the political sphere, media today have a broader influence over those issues on which the news media focus, which parties are invited to discuss the topic of the day, who should represent the parties in the media and how political actors, events and processes are framed. The media also have an important influence over politicians' behavior, as candidates often have to adapt to 'media logic'<sup>2</sup> (Altheide and Snow, 1979) in order to become visible in the media (Cook, 2005). Media logic refers to factors that are likely to increase public attention. For instance, media are more likely to cover a story if it meets certain news values, such as conflict, negativity, personalization, continuity or exclusiveness (Bell, 1991; Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). This has fueled a widespread frustration in political parties (Heidar and Saglie, 2002). Concerning the Norwegian case, Narud and Valen (2007) have shown that the power of the media is one of the factors political leaders fear most.

The perceptions and in some cases fear of the media's extensive influence, together with the media's increasing independence from political actors and institutions, have created strong incentives for political actors and institutions to adapt to the media and their logic, that is, the institutional, technological and sociological characteristics of the news media, including their formats, production and

dissemination routines, norms and needs, and standards of newsworthiness (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Strömbäck, 2008). These incentives have become even stronger as the parties have lost much of their stable support among voters as exemplified by the decreasing number of party members and increasing electoral volatility in both Norway and Sweden (Aardal, 2007; Oscarsson and Holmberg, 2008). At the same time, political actors and institutions might be reluctant to adapt to the media and their logic, either because the idea of adapting to the media and their logic is an anathema, or because other considerations are equally or more important than media considerations. As suggested by Meyer (2002), Mazzoleni (1987) and Strömbäck (2008), media logic can be perceived as opposed to political logic. Thus, many – if not most – political actors and institutions find themselves torn between the media and their logic, on the one hand, and politics and political logic, on the other.

Many top politicians, however, realize that success in influencing and being visible in the media is a prerequisite for political success. This can typically be achieved, first, by maintaining frequent and close contact with political journalists and, second, by adapting their role as a politician to the requirements of the modern media. Divergent views exist on how to approach the media and the need to influence them. While some play along and are ready to accept much in order to gain media attention or even use media logic systematically to their advantage, others are more critical and seek to find ways to make the media more responsible in their coverage and responsive to the needs of political actors (Jenssen and Aalberg, 2007; Karlsen and Narud, 2004).

Differences such as these can have far-reaching consequences for how political actors relate to the media, and consequently their success in influencing and gaining visibility in the media. In addition, if differences such as these are related to gender, for example, such that male politicians are more willing to play along and adapt to the media than female politicians, this might help to explain why female politicians in general are under-represented in the news.

## **The Relationship between the Media and Female Politicians**

Both Scandinavian and international research has shown that women are under-represented as news sources (Allern, 2001a; Eide, 2001; Gallagher, 2006; Jönsson and Strömbäck, 2007), although in both Norway and Sweden, politics is one of the ‘hard’ topics where female sources are most used compared with, for example, business news (Høidahl, 2006). When journalists are asked *why* women are under-represented as sources, they frequently argue that women are more reluctant than men to act as a source for news (Eide, 1991, 2001). This reluctance can be due to modesty or a fear of exposure in the media. In either case, if female politicians are under-represented in the news, this might have negative repercussions for their political influence, considering the importance of media coverage for politicians and the social construction of politics. This raises the question whether female politicians tend to be more skeptical towards becoming a source of news, or whether the media treat female politicians differently than male politicians.

Not only are women often under-represented in the news, international research has also shown that female politicians are often treated differently by the media than their male colleagues (Gidengil and Everitt, 2000, 2003; Kahn, 1992, 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1996; Larson, 2001). For example, female politicians are often primed to take up ‘softer’ issues, such as welfare and policies related to children and family. Several studies have also suggested that women are often confronted with questions and comments that focus on personal matters, not the current political issue or topic (Eide, 2000: 339; Ross and Sreberny, 2000: 87). Gidengil and Everitt (2003) have argued that female candidates suffer from a gender-typical form of communication, implying that women are mentioned, evaluated and framed differently, and more negatively, than men.

European research has also found evidence that male and female candidates are treated differently. For example, Semetko and Boomgaarden (2007) found that there were significant gender differences in how the German news media framed Angela Merkel and her male opponent Gerhard Schröder. It has also been stressed several times that it is more 'natural' to focus on appearance and personal life (often related to family obligations) when women are presented in the media (Eide, 2001; Ross and Sreberny, 2000). Van Zoonen (2005, 2006) argues that personification and attention directed towards appearance and personal life, rather than political ideas and policies, is more problematic for women than for men.

In interviews with female British MPs, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross (1996) find other factors that are an additional strain for female MPs. Several MP pointed to the fact that there exists an informal network of older male MPs and established journalists. As one MP notes: 'The media is largely driven by a small coterie of London-based media folks who meet an equally small group of predominantly male politicians at various functions. The exclusion of women's political voice is thus a function of privileged connections' (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross, 1996: 106).

The threshold to achieve contact with journalists is perceived as very high among the women in the study just cited. Female MPs were also critical of the British media coverage of politics. However, they admitted that their male colleagues were probably just as critical of the increased focus on scandals, personal matters and entertainment. Similarly, there is no reason to expect that male and female politicians would choose to portray themselves differently if they had control over the media content.

There is little research that reveals whether female politicians are treated or portrayed differently by Norwegian and Swedish media.<sup>3</sup> One of the few exceptions is a study by Krogstad (1999). She found that politicians participating in television debates had to apply traditional 'male power language' in order to avoid being ignored. Krogstad also found that female politicians who participated in television debates had to deal with a much higher level of disturbance and interruption compared with male participants. In other words, there seemed to be a clear gender difference when it came to the conditions of the interview. A similar study comparing the three Scandinavian countries also found that male politicians were generally given more time to speak in television debates. One important exception was leading female politicians in Norway (Krogstad and Gomard, 2003). The reason for this was that these politicians had adopted a more efficient communication strategy. Compared with their colleagues in the other Scandinavian countries, Norwegian female politicians seemed more eager to fight than to cooperate (Krogstad, 1999: 187).

Women's adaptation to a 'male power language' might, however, involve a few disadvantages. Among other things, Krogstad (1999: 256) argues that aggressive and attack-oriented women can be perceived as 'too much.' Moreover, perhaps adopting such a language is not sufficient for female candidates to appear credible and convincing. This is indicated by the results of an experimental study prior to the 2001 Norwegian election, which found that male and female politicians were judged very differently even when they delivered exactly the same speech (Aalberg and Jenssen, 2007).

## Main Expectations

Today, it is crucial for politicians to be visible in the media as a prerequisite for political success. Previous research has suggested two dimensions that are particularly important to achieving such visibility: first, frequent and close contact with journalists and, second, adaptation to media logic. Previous research has also given reason to expect that differences exist in the way male and female



MPs in Norway and Sweden relate to the media, despite the fact that these two countries constitute highly similar cases:

- (1) First, we expect to find that male MPs have a more frequent and closer relationship with the media compared with female MPs. This may be because women do not take advantage of available opportunities for media coverage; but it may also be the result of informal networks that mainly exist between male politicians and journalists and from which females are informally excluded.
- (2) Second, there is reason to believe that female MPs have a more strained relationship with the media, and that they are more critical about the dependence of politics on the media and media coverage of politics. If women are being treated differently and more negatively than men, it could be argued that they have strong reason to be more critical, while men play along with media logic to a larger degree and have a more relaxed relationship with the press. Thus, it might be the case that male MPs' adoption of media logic and adaptation to the media is more pronounced than among female MPs.
- (3) Finally, there is also reason to believe that differences exist even between the two gender-equal Scandinavian countries. If differences between these two similar and critical cases occur, we expect that the gender gap has narrowed more in Sweden. One reason is that Sweden has a higher proportion of female MPs than Norway. But another reason is that the two countries have a somewhat different approach to how equality is constructed. In Sweden, equality is mainly achieved through elimination of gender power differentials, while in Norway the equality through difference approach may cause political actors to be less concerned with a media-related gender gap. Thus, while Norway and Sweden constitute highly similar cases, similarity does not equal sameness, and the different approaches to gender equality may have a significant impact on how male and female MPs in the two countries relate to the media.

## Data and Methodology

This study draws upon a survey of MPs in the two countries. The study focuses on a comparison between genders in both countries. The selection of Norway and Sweden was based on the most similar systems design where the intention is to compare cases that are highly similar but which still differ in some important respects. In this design, 'it is anticipated that if some important differences are found among these otherwise similar countries, then the number of factors attributable to these differences will be sufficiently small to warrant explanation in terms of those differences' (Przeworski and Teune, 1970: 32). In the context of this study, the most important differences between Norway and Sweden are presumed to be (1) the higher proportion of female MPs in Sweden and (2) the different approaches to gender equality.

The Norwegian survey was conducted in the spring of 2007, and the Swedish survey during the winter of 2007/8. It is important to note that our questions referred to routine periods and that the data collection was *not* conducted during an election period. Although questioning of MPs has become quite common in most European countries (Esaiasson, 2000; Narud and Valen, 2007; Thomassen and Andeweg, 2004; Thomassen and Esaiasson, 2006), few surveys have devoted more than scant attention to the relationship and perceptions of MPs towards journalists and the media. To our knowledge only a limited number of studies have questioned politicians about their contacts with journalists (Davis, 2007; Larsson, 2001; Strömbäck and Nord, 2006; Van Aelst et al., 2008), and none of these focused on differences between male and female MPs.

In both countries included in this study, a comparable procedure of data collection was followed. All 169 members of the Norwegian *Storting* and all 349 members of the Swedish *Riksdag* were surveyed using a written questionnaire that could be completed on paper in Sweden and via an Internet website in Norway. Each questionnaire was adapted to the national context, but the core questions remained identical, and special care was given to the translation of the questions. In both countries several reminders were issued to increase the response rate. This resulted in a response rate of 51 percent in Norway and 45 percent in Sweden. The respondents were highly representative in terms of party representation<sup>4</sup> and, most important, there were no significant gender differences between the sample and the respondents. Thus, with respect to party affiliation and gender, our respondents are highly representative of all MPs in Norway and Sweden.

The literature review suggests that two main dimensions affect politicians' ability to develop a good relationship with the media and to receive media coverage. One dimension is related to the frequency and type of contacts, the second to the literature on media logic and its influence on politics. Questions examining these two dimensions were included in the questionnaire; the results relating to both dimensions are given below.

## Results

### *Personal Contact and Media Initiative*

The first aspect of MP–media relationships relates to possible gender differences in the frequency of contact with journalists. Researchers have repeatedly documented that women are underrepresented as news sources. This might be an indication that female MPs have less contact with journalists than male MPs. The first question investigated was whether female MPs in two of the most gender-equal parliaments in the world have less contact with journalists than male MPs.

The findings confirmed that male MPs have personal contact with journalists more frequently than do female MPs (see Table 1).<sup>5</sup> This pattern is particularly pronounced in Norway where MPs generally have more frequent personal contacts with journalists. The difference might be related to the fact that the Swedish parliament has almost twice as many MPs (349) than the Norwegian parliament (169). This idea of inter-politician competition is supported by earlier research suggesting that a high number of MPs in a country decreases the power of the individual MP in parliament (Esaiaasson and Heidar, 2000). There is also reason to believe that this increases the number of competitors for the same media attention.

**Table 1.** How Often Do MPs Have Personal Contact with a Journalist?

	Norway (%)		Sweden (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Almost every day	50	33	15	10
A few times a week	32	27	40	35
A few times a month or less	19	41	45	55
Total	101	101	100	100
<i>n</i>	54	27	85	54

Notes: Norway ( $X^2 = 4.74$  (df 2),  $p = 0.09$ ). Sweden ( $X^2 = 1.75$  (df 2),  $p = 0.41$ ).



The results also show that the gender difference is larger in Norway than in Sweden, that is, the disparity in the proportion of male versus female MPs that have personal contact with a journalist almost every day, or at least a few times a week, is greater in Norway than Sweden. Our data indicate that male MPs in Norway are more active than both their female and their male Swedish colleagues in their efforts to court the media. To investigate this further, MPs were asked to indicate who usually initiates the personal contacts.

The results are presented in Table 2 and suggest that Norwegian male MPs are somewhat more active in initiating contacts with journalists than Swedish male MPs and female MPs in both countries. This difference is not statistically significant but there is a clear trend whereby female MPs in Norway are more likely to report that journalists initiate contacts. While only 26 percent of male MPs in Norway state that journalists initiate the contacts most of the time, 37 percent of female Norwegian MPs state that journalists take the initiative. In Sweden, both male and female MPs appear to be more passive than Norwegian MPs, and there is no gender difference at all.

Another aspect of the relationship between MPs and journalists involves how they come into contact with each other. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ross's (1996) study suggested that in the British case, male MPs were more likely than female MPs to be part of informal networks together with other male MPs and political journalists. The question arises whether such informal networks exist in the two Scandinavian countries, and whether male MPs nurture informal forms of contact more than female MPs. To investigate this question, we asked MPs in what ways they had personal contact with journalists, and how often they meet in a number of different venues. Factor analysis of the replies confirms that we may distinguish between more *formal* types of contact on the one hand (interviews, meetings in the halls and corridors of the parliament, through telephone conversations and so forth) and *informal* types of contact on the other (receptions, lunches, informal meetings in the evening). Figure 1 provides an overview of the mean scores among male and female MPs in the two countries for the different types of contact.

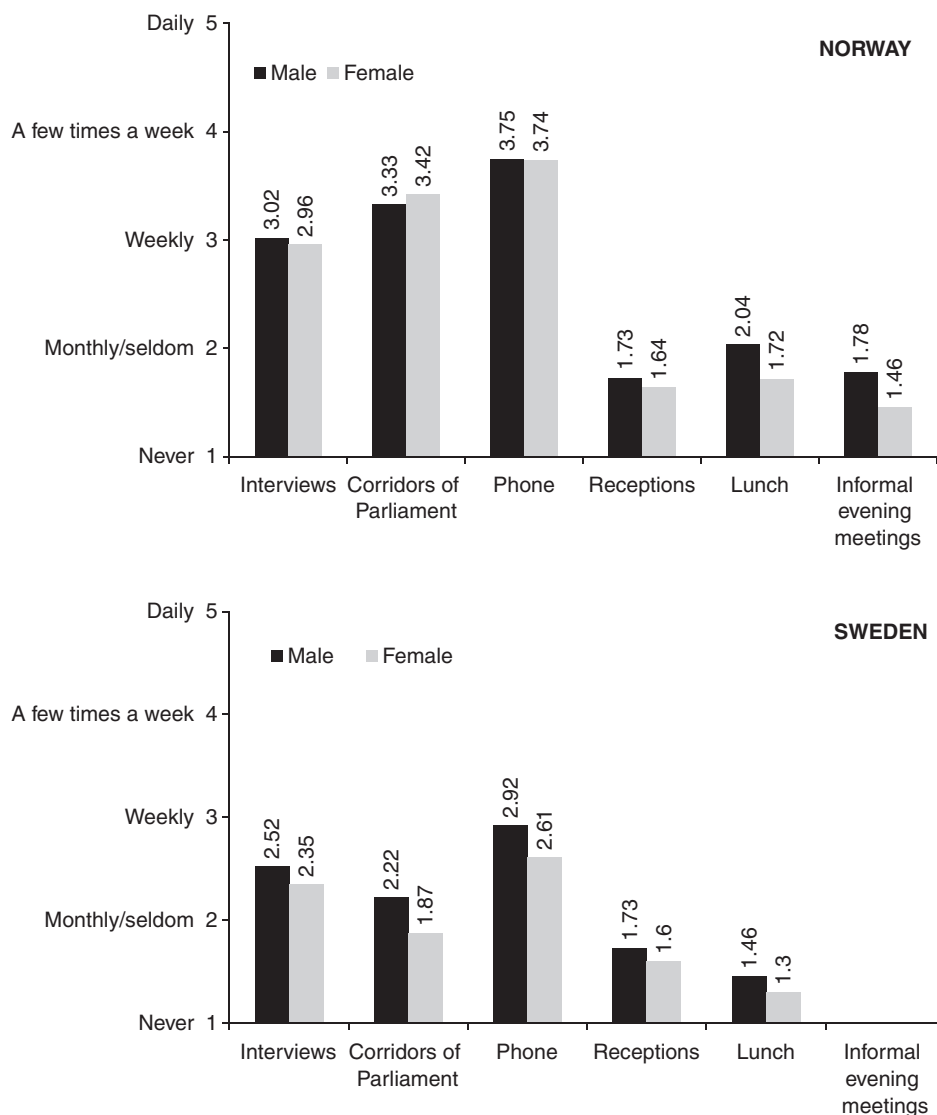
The data in Figure 1 are mean scores on a scale from 1 to 5 where 5 indicates that MPs have such contact on a daily basis, while 1 indicates that they never have contact with journalists in this way. Not surprisingly, the formal types of contact, particularly conversations over the phone, are most widespread in both countries. In the Norwegian case, there are barely any gender differences with respect to formal contacts, but in the Swedish case, formal contacts with journalists are more common among male than female MPs.

The pattern concerning informal contact is somewhat different. First, both male and female Norwegian MPs appear to have more informal contacts with journalists than Swedish MPs – in particular, lunches and informal evening meetings, which are significantly more common in the

**Table 2.** Who Usually Initiates These Personal Contacts?

	Norway (%)		Sweden (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Most of the time MP or a staff member	15	19	11	13
About equally divided between the two	59	44	39	37
Most of the time the journalist	26	37	49	50
Total	100	100	99	100
<i>n</i>	54	27	83	54

Notes: Norway ( $\chi^2 = 1.631$  (df 2),  $p = 0.44$ ). Sweden ( $\chi^2 = 0.30$  (df 2),  $p = 0.86$ ).



**Figure 1.** How (and How Often) Do MPs Have Personal Contact with Journalists (Means)

Notes: Norway: Interviews ( $F = 0.053$  (df 1),  $p = 0.82$ ). Parliament ( $F = 0.085$  (df 1),  $p = 0.77$ ). Phone ( $F = 0.002$  (df 1),  $p = 0.97$ ). Receptions ( $F = 1.703$  (df 1),  $p = 0.19$ ). Lunch ( $F = 1.971$  (df 1),  $p = 0.16$ ). Informal evening meetings ( $F = 5.252$  (df 1),  $p = 0.02$ ).  $N = 74$ .

Sweden: Interviews ( $F = 2.136$  (df 1),  $p = 0.15$ ). Parliament ( $F = 4.846$  (df 1),  $p = 0.03$ ). Phone ( $F = 5.611$  (df 1),  $p = 0.02$ ). Receptions ( $F = 1.940$  (df 1),  $p = 0.17$ ). Lunch ( $F = 3.093$  (df 1),  $p = 0.08$ ). Informal evening meetings Not asked  $N = 139$ .

Norwegian than the Swedish case. Second, informal contacts with journalists are more common among male than among female Norwegian MPs; the same pattern appears in the Swedish case although the differences are smaller.<sup>6</sup> Overall, the results so far suggest not only that Norwegian MPs have more personal contacts with journalists and that they are more active in initiating these contacts than Swedish MPs, but also that gender differences are greater in Norway than in Sweden.

**Table 3.** Do the MP Consider Any Journalists to be Friends?

	Norway (%)		Sweden (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
No	56	59	51	66
Yes, one or two	30	37	38	30
Yes, three or more	15	4	11	4
Total	101	100	100	100
<i>n</i>	54	27	84	53

Notes: Norway ( $X^2 = 2.35$  (df 2),  $p = 0.31$ ). Sweden ( $X^2 = 4.49$  (df 2),  $p = 0.11$ ).

**Table 4.** Did They Ever Ask a Journalist for Advice About Their Work as a Politician?

	Norway (%)		Sweden (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Sometimes	13	4	7	6
Seldom	48	30	27	22
Never	39	67	66	72
Total	100	101	100	100
<i>n</i>	54	27	85	54

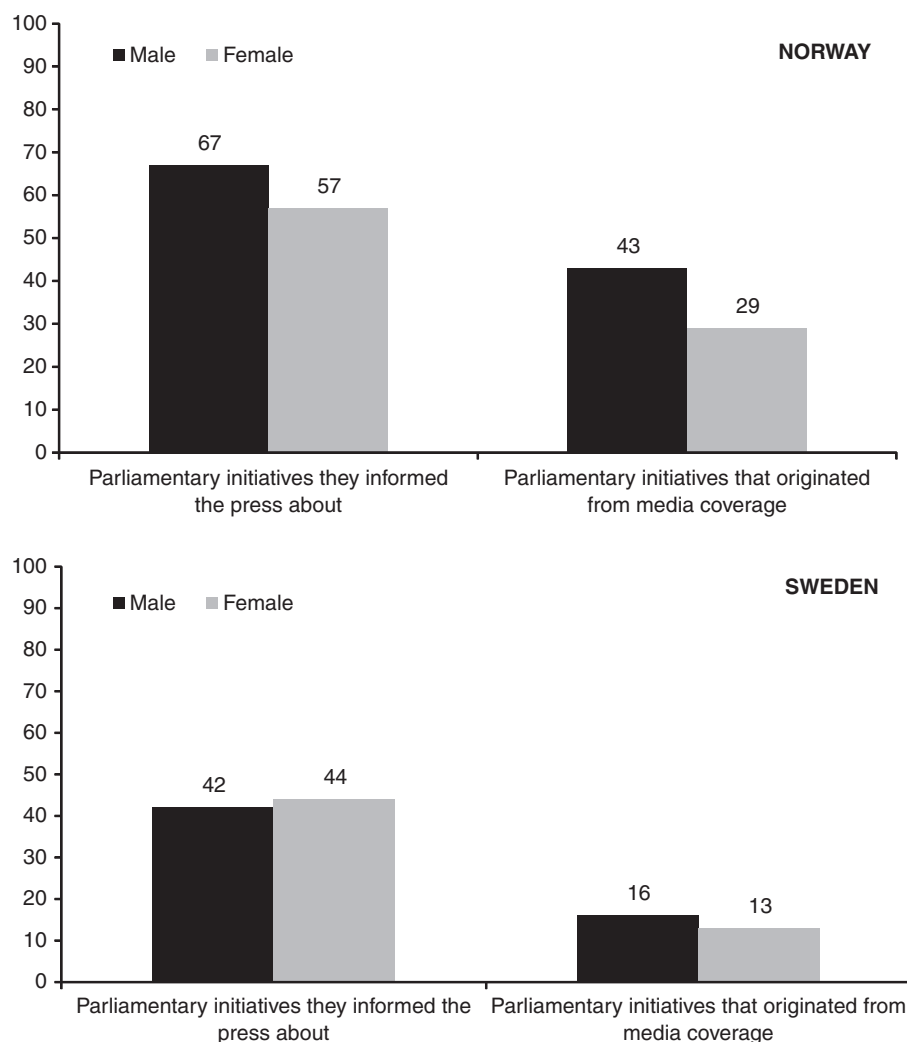
Notes: Norway ( $X^2 = 5.92$  (df 2),  $p = 0.05$ ). Sweden ( $X^2 = 0.81$  (df 2),  $p = 0.67$ ).

Having said this, informal forms of contact cannot be said to be a very common feature in the Scandinavian political communication culture, although male MPs in both countries are more inclined to take the opportunity of meeting journalists informally (and formally) than female MPs. Does this also imply that male MPs have more personal friends among the journalists? To investigate this, we asked the MPs whether they considered any journalists to be personal friends. The results are presented in Table 3.

In both Norway and Sweden, more male than female MPs report that they have personal friends among journalists, although the difference is more pronounced in the Swedish than the Norwegian case. While 45 percent of male MPs in Norway and 49 percent of male MPs in Sweden regard at least one journalist as a friend; the corresponding proportions among female MPs in Norway and Sweden are 41 and 34 percent, respectively. The same pattern appears if we focus on the group of MPs that considers three or more journalists as their friends: this group is larger among male compared to female MPs in both countries.

Do male MPs also take advantage of their closer and more frequent contacts with journalists, for example, by asking journalists for advice about their work as a politician? The answer is 'yes' – particularly when we focus on the differences between Norwegian male and female MPs. While 39 percent of the male MPs in Norway never ask journalists for advice, fully 67 percent of female MPs never do. Conversely, while 13 percent of male MPs in Norway sometimes ask journalists for advice, only 4 percent of female MPs do. In Sweden the gender difference is very small and non-significant, but the tendency is still for Swedish male MPs to be somewhat more active in asking journalists for advice than female MPs.

While advice from journalists is not something that is frequently sought, 13 percent of Norwegian male MPs state that they do so from time to time. In Sweden it is less common, but occurs more frequently among male than female MPs. Comparing both gender and countries, the results



**Figure 2.** Average Share of Parliamentary Initiatives Male and Female MPs Have Oriented the Press About or That Had its Origin in Media Coverage

Notes: Norway: Initiatives they informed the press about ( $F = 0.857$  ( $df\ 1$ ),  $p = 0.36$ ). Initiatives that originated from media coverage ( $F = 3.509$  ( $df\ 1$ ),  $p = 0.07$ ).  $N = 48$ .

Sweden: Initiatives they informed the press about ( $F = 0.500$  ( $df\ 1$ ),  $p = 0.82$ ). Initiatives that originated from media coverage ( $F = 0.209$  ( $df\ 1$ ),  $p = 0.65$ ).  $N = 133$ .

indicate that male MPs in Norway have a particularly active relationship with journalists. Is this media strategy also evident in their parliamentary work?

To investigate this, the respondents were asked to indicate how many parliamentary initiatives they had taken since the beginning of the parliamentary year.<sup>7</sup> We also asked the MPs to estimate how many of their parliamentary initiatives they had informed the press about and how many of their parliamentary initiatives had originated from something they had seen, read or heard about in the media. Based on these questions we constructed two variables that show the percentage share of initiatives that (1) they had informed the press about and (2) that had originated from media coverage. Figure 2 shows the average percentages among male and female MPs in Norway and Sweden.

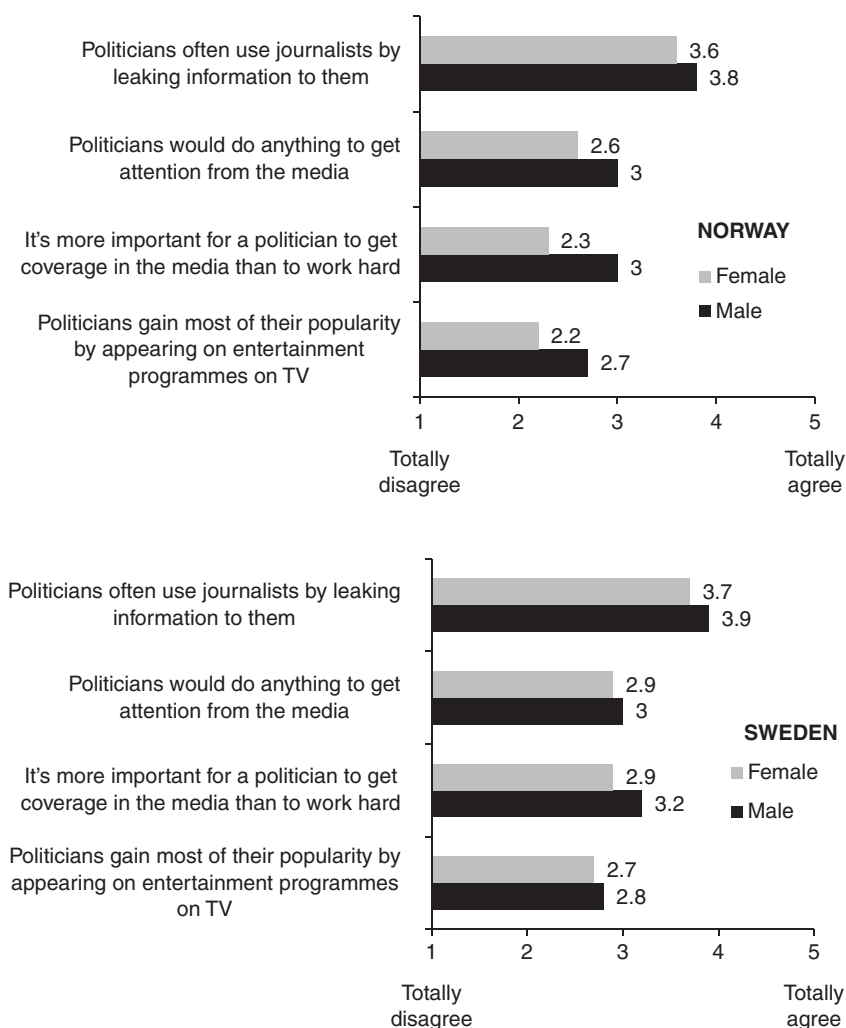
Again the results suggest that Norwegian MPs are more oriented towards the media than Swedish MPs, and that the gender gap is greater among Norwegian than among Swedish MPs. While 67 and 57 percent of the male and female MPs in Norway informed the press about their parliamentary initiatives, the corresponding proportions of male and female MPs in Sweden were 42 and 44 percent, respectively. The Norwegian gender gap was even greater when we focus on parliamentary initiatives that originated from media coverage. While 29 percent of parliamentary initiatives by female MPs in Norway originated from stories in the media, 43 percent of parliamentary initiatives by male MPs had the same origin.

As a preliminary conclusion, we can state that there are significant differences between how male and female MPs relate to journalists and the media, particularly in Norway. Although some gender differences do exist in the Swedish case, the Swedes are closer to gender equality. Generally, it appears as if male MPs in Norway emphasize their relationships with media more so than female MPs, and that MPs in Norway in general emphasize their relationship with the media more than Swedish MPs. Does this also indicate that Norwegian male MPs have adapted more to the so-called media logic than female MPs, and that Norwegian MPs in general have done so more than Swedish MPs?

### *Politics and Adaptation to Media Logic*

Previous research has suggested that politicians are divided in their views on how to deal with media and journalists. While some play along and take the media's needs and requirements as a given in their attempts to gain media coverage, others are more critical and attempt to change the way in which the media operate and how they cover politics. Phrased differently, while some politicians are more prone to accepting and adapting to media logic, others are more prone to insisting that the media operate according to political logic rather than media logic (Meyer, 2002; Strömbäck, 2008). In light of the above evidence, which suggests that male MPs are more active in their outreach to media and journalists, there is reason to believe that gender differences also exist with respect to how male and female MPs perceive the extent to which politicians adapt to the media and how critical they are towards media coverage of politics. To investigate this, MPs in both countries were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with four statements: (1) politicians often use journalists by leaking information to them; (2) politicians would do anything to get attention from the media; (3) it is more important for a politician to get coverage in the media than to work hard; and (4) politicians gain most of their popularity by appearing on entertainment programs on television. Figure 3 presents the mean scores on a scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

The results show a consistent pattern throughout both countries, although the gender differences are generally smaller in Sweden than in Norway. In both countries, and particularly in Norway, male MPs are significantly more prone to agree with statements that ultimately concern the degree to which politicians have adapted to the media and their logic. In both countries, but particularly in Norway, more male than female MPs agree that politicians gain most of their popularity by appearing on entertainment programs on television, that many politicians would do anything to get attention from the media, and that it is more important for a politician to get coverage in the media than to work hard. More male MPs than female MPs also agree that politicians frequently leak information to journalists. If politicians, like people in general, tend to know others as they know themselves, this indicates that male MPs have adapted to the media and their logic to a greater degree than female MPs.

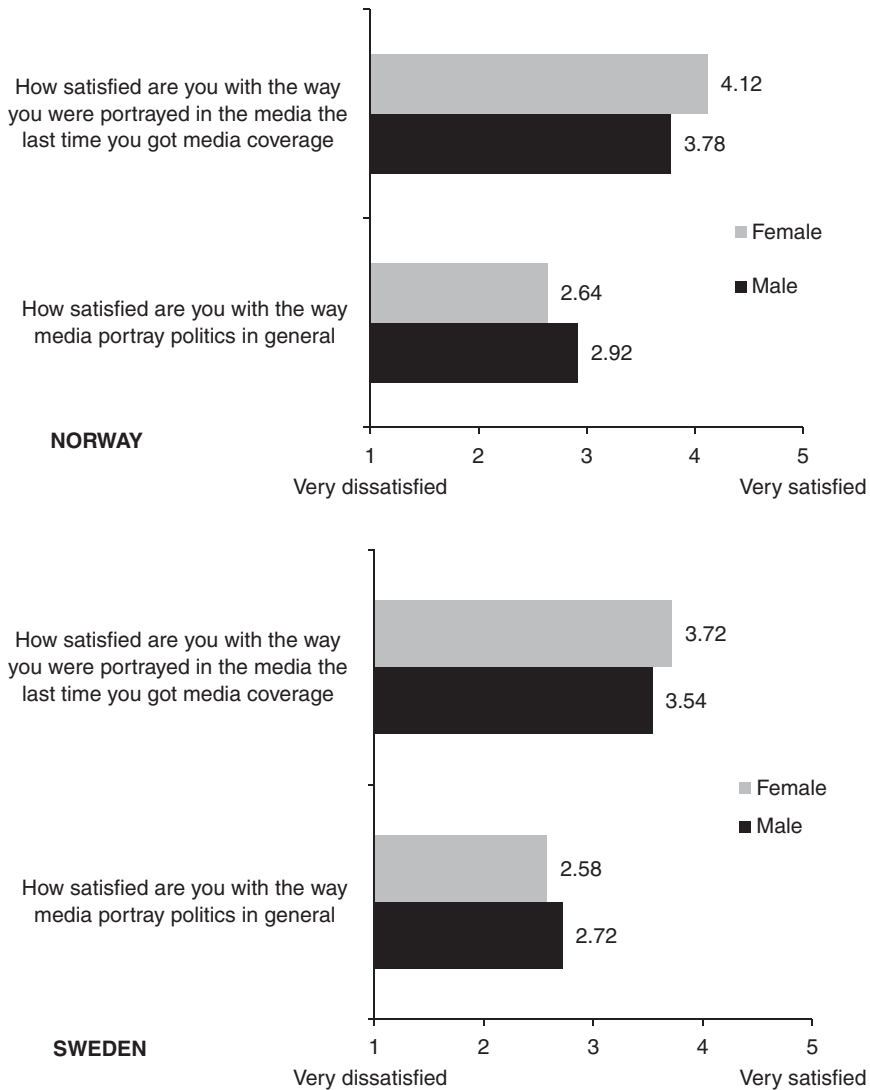


**Figure 3.** MPs' Perception of Politicians' Media Adjustment (Means on Scale from 1 to 5)

Notes: Norway: Leaking information ( $F = 0.883$  (df 1),  $p = 0.35$ ). Media coverage more important than hard work ( $F = 6.397$  (df 1),  $p = 0.01$ ). Do anything to get attention from the media ( $F = 4.062$  (df 1),  $p = 0.05$ ). Gain most popularity by appearing on entertainment programmes ( $F = 3.659$  (df 1),  $p = 0.06$ ).  $N = 76$ .

Sweden: Leaking information ( $F = 1.579$  (df 1),  $p = 0.21$ ). Media coverage more important than hard work ( $F = 2.871$  (df 1),  $p = 0.09$ ). Do anything to get attention from the media ( $F = 0.526$  (df 1),  $p = 0.47$ ). Gain most popularity by appearing on entertainment programmes ( $F = 0.072$  (df 1),  $p = 0.79$ ).  $N = 153$ .

Related to this, international research has indicated that female politicians are described, evaluated and framed differently and more negatively than men. Unfortunately we have not found any extensive or comparative study of how male versus female politicians are framed by the news media in the two Scandinavian countries, but some research findings suggest that female candidates in Norway often get lower scores than their male colleagues when participating in televised debates (Krogstad, 2004).



**Figure 4.** MPs' Perception of Media Coverage of Politics in General and of Themselves (Percentage)

Notes: Norway: Satisfied with the way media portray politics in general ( $F = 2.075$  (df 1),  $p = 0.15$ ). Satisfied with how they were portrayed in media ( $F = 4.474$  (df 1),  $p = 0.04$ ).  $N = 76$ .

Sweden: Satisfied with the way media portray politics in general ( $F = 1.017$  (df 1),  $p = 0.32$ ). Satisfied with how they were portrayed in media ( $F = 1.606$  (df 1),  $p = 0.21$ ).  $N = 153$ .

Are female MPs more critical than male MPs of the media coverage of politics both in general and when they themselves are part of the media coverage? To investigate whether this is the case, MPs in both countries were asked (1) how satisfied they are with the way the media portray politics in general and (2) how satisfied they are with how they themselves were portrayed by the media the last time they received media coverage. The results are presented in Figure 4, showing the mean scores on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).



The results show that both male and female MPs in both countries are highly dissatisfied with the way that the media cover politics in general. As expected, there is a tendency in both countries for female MPs to be more critical than male MPs of media coverage of politics, although the difference is not significant. The level of satisfaction is notably higher concerning the way MPs perceive media coverage of themselves the last time they were mentioned. A majority in both parliaments expresses satisfaction with the way they were portrayed in the media, but now a reverse gender gap appears: female MPs are no longer the most critical. Rather, more female than male MPs declare that they are satisfied with the way they were portrayed last time.

This pattern suggests that male MPs are more indifferent to the qualities of the media coverage of themselves as long as they get media attention, whereas female MPs tend to be relieved when they get good publicity because they often fear that it would be negative. An alternative explanation could be that the female MPs have stronger reasons to be satisfied because they tend to participate only when they feel comfortable with the topic at hand or the media format. A final explanation for the higher proportion of satisfied female MPs could be that it is a myth that women are highly self-critical with respect to their own media participation. Or perhaps this myth simply does not apply to female MPs because they are elite politicians who all have a certain degree of media experience and knowledge of how one should relate to the media.

## Conclusion

Are female politicians too naïve, while their male colleagues have more realistic perceptions of how modern media relations work? Does the greater extent of female 'stand-offishness' prevent further mediatization of politics? Are male politicians driven too much by media logic? These are partly normative questions to which this study will not be able to provide an answer. However, the results strongly suggest that male MPs have adjusted more to the media than seems to be the case for female MPs, that is, there is a clear and rather consistent gender gap between how male and female MPs perceive their relationships with the media. This gender gap is most evident among members of the Norwegian parliament. When 35 percent of male MPs but only 8 percent of female MPs agree with the statement 'it is more important for a politician to get coverage in the media than to work hard', this points to significant gender differences in the Norwegian political communication culture. In the Swedish case there are smaller, but still some significant, differences between the genders. The implication is that the gender equality achieved in Norwegian and Swedish politics per se has not completely eliminated all gender differences regarding how male and female politicians relate to media. Male and female MPs still have a somewhat different relationship with political journalists and the press, especially in Norway.

This is possibly not very surprising considering that international research has suggested a negative media bias towards female politicians. However, most research has been conducted in countries where the proportion of female MPs is much lower than in Norway and Sweden. As Norway and Sweden are two of the countries with the highest female political representation in the world, it could be expected that gender differences with respect to both the media coverage of politics and politicians' relationships with the media should be small in these two countries. It is indeed rather small in Sweden, but according to the present study, this is not the case among Norwegian MPs.

Generally speaking, male MPs have more contact with political journalists than female MPs. Even though most of this contact takes place through formal venues for both groups, male MPs are also involved in more informal types of contact. Moreover, they seem to be more active in taking advantage of the opportunities that these contacts provide, and they orient themselves more towards the media in their daily work in the parliament. This study hence suggests that male MPs,

in general, have adjusted their behavior and strategies to the media logic more effectively than female MPs.

One could imagine that there are more male than female journalists, and that this has an impact on our findings.<sup>8</sup> Although a large majority of journalism students in the Nordic countries are female (76 percent in both Norway and Sweden), male students seem to have a stronger preference for politics as their field of specialty (Bjørnsen et al., 2007). Male dominance within political journalism is also confirmed in studies of established political journalists. In a Norwegian study only 30 percent of the political journalists were female, indicating that there is about the same proportion of female political journalists as female MPs (Aalberg and Jamtøy, 2008: 83).

Overall, the results suggest that the gender gap is more pronounced in the Norwegian than the Swedish case. This could be interpreted as meaning that Sweden is a more gender equal society than Norway. The fact that the proportion of female MPs is higher in Sweden than in Norway is obviously one important explanation for the smaller gender gap in the Swedish than in the Norwegian case. Another important explanation may be the different approaches to achieving gender equality, that is, that the media-related gender gap is perceived as less of a societal problem in Norway than in Sweden: in Norway, there is a stronger tendency to perceive gender equality as a question of utility and individual choices rather than basic rights.

We believe, however, that many of these differences are related to the fact that Norwegian MPs are more active than Swedish MPs in their relationships with the media. In this sense, the competition among MPs for media attention is tougher in Norway than in Sweden, and this might favor male MPs over female MPs. The initiative for personal contacts comes from journalists more frequently in Sweden than is the case in Norway. This could lead to a better balance between male and female MPs featured in the news coverage, particularly as the share of female MPs is higher in the Swedish than the Norwegian case. Another important difference between Norway and Sweden is the number of MPs, which is about twice as high in the latter country. This means that a Norwegian MP, on average, has a stronger say in parliamentary affairs than a Swedish MP and might therefore be considered more newsworthy. This could create stronger incentives for Norwegian MPs than Swedish MPs to be active and reach out to the media. Leaving aside the differences between Norway and Sweden, the results demonstrate that even in two of the most gender-equal countries in the world, a gender gap does exist with respect to MPs' relationships with the media. It might be smaller than in other countries, particularly in the Swedish case, but it nevertheless persists.

This gender gap may have important consequences for the political influence of female as opposed to male MPs. In a world where mediated reality often matters more than actual reality, as it is often the only reality that people have access to, media visibility is an important prerequisite for the exercise of political influence. If active outreach to the media is important for establishing visibility in the media, then this suggests a causal chain in which gender differences in media relationships foster gender differences in the media coverage of politics. This pattern could promote gender differences in political power and influence. From the perspective of gender equality, the gender differences revealed in this study are a problem that needs to be addressed.

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## Notes

1. Utility arguments are typically related to how women can 'contribute.' Focus is on equal participation as a *supplementary good* and related to *profitability* rather than *basic rights*. Skjeie and Teigen (2005)

- argue that these utility arguments are problematic because they put equality on the defense: Participation becomes contingent on other success criteria: what if women's equal participation does not change priorities or enforce greater productivity? Should existing regulations for gender balance then be abolished?
2. Briefly, media logic as a concept refers to how media content is selected and shaped to fit the media's own formats, production processes, news values and needs. Among those needs is the need for compelling news stories, which shapes news values. Among these news values are negativity, unexpectedness, personalization, conflict, continuity and reference to elite persons. This indicates that politicians who adapt to a media logic adjust their 'story' to fit these news criteria and thus increase their chances of media coverage. This can be done, for instance, by adding a human interest element or focusing on conflict so that the journalists receive a dramatic effect, or relate their arguments to a story that is already in the news.
  3. There are, however, some studies on how the media relate to politicians or MPs in general, or how MPs relate to the media (Aardal et al., 2004; Allern, 2001b; Eide, 1991; Samuelsen, 1997; Sivertsen, 1987).
  4. Bivariate Pearson correlations between the relative presences of parties in parliament compared with in the survey were 0.983 in Norway and 0.987 in Sweden (significant at the 0.01 level).
  5. Below the tables and figures the results from tests of significance are given. When interpreting these results it is very important to remember that this is *not* a randomly drawn sample from a large population. Rather, our respondents are actually half of the entire population of legislators in these two countries. It is also important to remember that in small *N* studies like ours it is much harder to obtain high levels of significance compared with traditional large *N* studies. In studies with a high *N* even small differences can be significant, whereas in small *N* studies large differences can fail to reach the 'required' level of significance. The results from the significance tests do show that the largest differences do reach our chosen level of significance (0.10/0.05), but based on the nature of our data, we argue that even differences that fail to reach this level of significance can be interesting.
  6. Note that the difference between men and women MPs meeting journalists for lunch is smallest in Sweden and largest in Norway. Yet, the difference in Sweden reaches our required level of significance ( $p = 0.08$ ) whereas the Norwegian difference does not ( $p = 0.16$ ). This is due to a higher number of MPs in Sweden compared with the Norwegian case (see also note 5 on levels of significance and size of *N*).
  7. In the Swedish case, MPs were asked how many parliamentary initiatives they had taken since the 2006 election. In this respect, the results are not fully comparable between countries, but they are still comparable in respect of gender within countries.
  8. Unfortunately our study did not allow us to relate the MPs' relationship with and attitude towards the media and the gender of the journalists they most frequently have contact with.

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## Biographical Notes

**Toril Aalberg** is Professor of Media Sociology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). She graduated as a Dr Polit. in Political Science (2001) with emphasis on comparative public opinion studies. Her previous work includes comparative studies of public opinion on income inequalities and distributive justice as well as studies on political communication. Fields of interest are the relationship between media and politics, election campaigns, how media affects public opinion and the role of stereotypes. Aalberg has published extensively in both Norwegian and International books and journals. [email: [toril.aalberg@svt.ntnu.no](mailto:toril.aalberg@svt.ntnu.no)]

Jesper Strömbäck is Professor in Media and Communication, and Professor and Chair in Journalism, at Mid Sweden University, Sundsvall, Sweden. He is also research director at the Centre for Political Communication Research at Mid Sweden University. His research mainly focuses on political news coverage, political campaigning and marketing, the mediatization of politics, and comparative political communication research. Altogether he has published about 100 books, book chapters and journal articles. [email: [jesper.stromback@miun.se](mailto:jesper.stromback@miun.se)]