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"I am the gatekeeper": why and how ministerial media advisers have been empowered

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Although policy advisers have been amply studied, far fewer studies have examined media advisers. And, so far, adviser research has offered few insights into the relationship between these two key groups of political staffers. This article claims that media advisers have been empowered. It offers a rational functionalist explanation, which emphasises concerns about functional efficiency. Media generates functional pressures for the institutional strengthening of media advisers, solidifying their role. This argument is examined empirically through a case study of ministerial media adviser (MMA) empowerment in Sweden, based on interviews conducted among MMAs and political journalists. The data tell us that MMAs are on the rise, that they have become more controlling toward journalists and more assertive within ministerial staff. In the process, MMAs have come to constitute a category of their own as they have converged among themselves but diverged from policy advisers. The interview evidence indicates that MMAs also have a role in government policy, as the media has contributed to more integration of communication and policy, but additional research is needed. Overall, this work has implications for research on political communication, executives, and advisers—especially for debates about political professionals in government.

KEYWORDS

empowerment, functional, gatekeeper, government, ministerial media adviser, policy adviser, Sweden

Introduction

Writing about political advisers generally falls into one of two categories. There are policy advisers. And then there are the media or communication advisers. This article looks at the much-needed government or ministerial media advisers, henceforth called MMAs. Despite the important, indeed indispensable, role they play, it is hitherto underappreciated in political adviser research. Separately, media advisers and policy advisers exist to face different challenges, but the question of their interaction has not been systematically explored. And the existing literature on political advisers has given little explanation for potential shifts in the balance between them. This article targets this gap in our understanding of political staffers in these systems and offers new depth to accounts that centre on advisers in politics. Why and how have media advisers gained in power?

The purpose in this article is to explore the empowerment of MMAs, addressing gaps and adding to research on the role of political advisers in government more generally. I am writing about trends in political staffing and about political staffers that are fundamentally important to how government functions. I address this topic through a focus on the circumstances under which MMAs matter more. I advance an argument that highlights a central factor shaping the extent to which MMAs have become more prominent. I claim that an important part of the explanation for the empowerment of MMAs is the intensified functional pressures of media which prompts adaptation of structures, procedures and practices in government to these

functional requirements, with implications for the balance of power within the executive.

I explore this argument empirically through an illustrative case study of MMA empowerment in Sweden, summarizing evidence from interviews with acting or former MMAs and journalists. Sweden is an illustrative case of a more general trend of necessary governmental adaptation to the functional pressures of media. This means that we in Sweden are likely to find observable expectations of my theory. But by tradition press secretaries in the Swedish executive had a more limited role, which suggests that Sweden could present a least-likely case for MMA empowerment. Everywhere the transformative pressure of environmental factors including media is likely to be mediated by pre-existing institutional and political conditions.

Government communication—defined broadly as the structures, practices and processes of the executive in its communication aspects—is required to handle pressing challenges facing government day by day (e.g., Sanders and Canel, 2013). Pressures of media, different kinds of media, mean that governments need to respond and to put in place support structures for this purpose. In many countries around the world, not least in Europe, more complex forms of government communication have emerged. In such systems, media advisers have grown in numbers and prominence. They have become more important through the work they do and its significance. They do not just serve in an informational capacity but are also there to fill a political purpose. It involves efforts to control information and to influence news coverage.

As these media advisers are embedded in political structures their work is very political in scope. They find themselves in a political milieu where communications support is essential if the government is to succeed. Seymour-Ure (2003: 6), who observed institutionalization and centralization of communications staff functions, noted that “a political system is a system of communication.” And Deutsch (1963: ix) pointed out that we should look upon government more as a problem of steering which is “decisively a matter of communication.” Yet it remains striking how relatively neglected “communication” is in political analysis, at least in Sweden. The field of political science needs to become more communications-curious and, to tackle questions of media–politics relations and effects, learn from interdisciplinary exchanges.

Politics and the media are in a mutually dependent relationship. When we look at power over the media—what gets shown or reported—the media adviser, according to Street (2021: xix), becomes the key actor because the job is “to pre-empt unfavourable bias, or to introduce a favourable one, and so to help the politically powerful...” These media advisers play an essential role, placed as they are between government and media. They help the government of the day to meet its goals. Increasingly, government ministers have come to require more than policy advice. MMAs do not only handle media requests. But thanks to all external and internal connections they may have access to information about every branch of government and this informational advantage is a tremendous source of power. And within political staffs, there may be competition for access to the minister and information.

Worth noting is also that government communications involve civil servants, non-partisan officials. Their role too is affected by the institutionalized and normalized public relations in government. “In practice,” however, Garland (2017: 177) notes, “the ‘line’ between impartial and partisan communication is ambiguous and ill-defined,

and is administered pragmatically, on professional instinct, through negotiation, within a day-to-day context.” The relationship between non-partisan officials and political employees is not dealt with here but is an important line of inquiry for future study of staffers who conduct communications-related work in government.¹

The article proceeds in the following steps. In the next section, I provide an overview of earlier research and engage with one body of literature, the role of advisers in politics, identifying strands and gaps in existing research. I then outline my theoretical argument, specifying expectations for why and how MMAs are empowered. The subsequent section discusses the method and data. Next, I present the case study and the results of interviews on MMA empowerment in the Swedish national executive. In the final section, I conclude by discussing the results of the analysis and their wider relevance and implications.

The neglect of media advisers in political adviser research

The topic of this article relates to particularly one body of literature: the role of advisers in politics. The question of whether advisers in politics matter, and, if so, how they matter, has generated growing scholarly interest over the past decades. Below, I engage with this body of literature. It includes different strands of research. In none of them does media advisers constitute the central analytical concern, but in some we can nowadays find contributions that speak to this topic (e.g., Askim et al., 2017; Figenschou et al., 2017, 2023; Ng, 2018; Yong and Hazell, 2014).

Simplifying slightly, I would argue that political adviser research has kind of overlooked media advisers, as to date most of this literature has centred on ministerial advisers as policy advisers and in relation to civil servants (for a general overview, see Shaw, 2023, and Staroňová and Rybář, 2023); and policy advisory systems (e.g., Policy Sciences, 2017; Policy Studies, 2019; Craft and Halligan, 2020; Marciano and Craft, 2023; Migone and Howlett, 2024). In these systems, advice arises from many different actors interacting with each other. They are not all equally influential in terms of informing policy substance.

An obvious reason for the surge of interest in such advisers and systems is the expansion in them. However, all these professionals do not work in typical policy making positions (e.g., Craft, 2016). Most play a combination of roles all of which are political. They are political appointees. Some are chiefly concerned with policy. Some spend a good deal of their working time on matters connected with communications (for an illustration, see Rice et al., 2015).

Hence, the policy/media division is not always discrete. But usually there are other staffers for all the media/communication purposes: press secretaries or media advisers. Given the dependence of government ministers on their media advisers, that communications are one of the most pressing problems facing government today, one

¹ The involvement of senior civil servants in media management is analyzed by Salomonsen et al. (2024). They compare the cases of Denmark, Sweden and the UK. Their findings raise crucial questions about “the political neutrality of administrators, tendencies towards politicised governance and (more) interventionist political staffers – amid intensified pressures from the media on governments.”

might reasonably expect to find an extensive coverage of these advisers in the academic literature on political advisers. Yet, there is relatively little.

An overview of political adviser research results in the following two observations. First, the primary focus in the literature is on policy advisers who are political employees but whose work is mainly on policy. Second, most existing research on political advisers or the advisory role in governments deal with the relationship between such political staff, whether to the prime minister or ministers, and the civil servants and the tensions that may exist between them.

The fights may look different. The conflicts may be between policy advisers and media advisers within ministerial staffs. Policy may play a role in this fight. Conflicts over policy goals or presentations may expose fractures in ministerial staffs and feed into their inner workings, eroding collective action. Yet, more rarely is political adviser research concerned with conflicts within the political staffs.

It is hard to find anything written on media advice as policy work. In fact, studies of advisers in politics/government have explicitly excluded media advisers because of a perception that they are not involved with policy issues (e.g., Maley, 2002). But those engaged in communication, broadly, in disseminating information and maintaining interpersonal relationships with media and politicians, notably press secretaries, may do policy work, as part of their job. In fact, advisers may spend a good deal of their working time on matters connected with communications, for example communicating with others, including the media, about the government's policies.

Within the broader academic literature focusing on the role of advisers in politics media advisers have thus received relatively little attention. A survey of the field of political advisers in the executive branch, by Ng (2020: 514), observes that there is less focus on the media-politics dimension and that "the roles of media advisers remain relatively understudied compared to their policy-based counterparts..." More recently Karlsen and Kolltveit (2023: 387) conclude that "systematic empirical evidence about MMAs is mostly lacking." That special thematic chapter on ministerial advisers and the media is part of a volume on ministerial and political advisers, edited by Shaw (2023), but still there is relatively little on ministerial media advisers and their role.

A previous (comparative) volume, edited by Shaw and Eichbaum (2018), addresses advisory roles but media advisers are only mentioned in the Germany chapter, including their role in relation to presentations and possibly also to substantive policy decision through suggestions on how to "sell" policies and achieve positive media coverage; and, relatively little, in the chapters on Denmark and the United Kingdom. This is remarkable given the key role of media advisers in those executive systems. The Sweden chapter in that book does not refer specifically to media advisers but mentions—almost in passing—"press secretaries." The focus is on the relationship between civil servants and political advisers. Worth noting is also that the study had to exclude political advisers at the prime minister's office because it did not endorse the survey [Niklasson and Öhberg, 2018; see also Niklasson et al. (2020)]. This illustrates the difficulties involved in data collection; the well-known challenges of securing high-level participants for interviews.

When it comes to Sweden, there is limited empirical research on media advisers. Political/ministerial adviser researchers have hitherto by and large paid scant attention to media advisers, barring a few notable exceptions. The rare studies that to a certain extent have

examined political staffs as media advisers, or press secretaries as they are called in the Swedish case, include one doctoral thesis on ministerial staffs [Ullström, 2011; see also Ullström (2008)] and an interdisciplinary research programme on, a broad category and a heterogeneous set of actors, (partisan) "policy professionals" (Garsten et al., 2015; Svallfors, 2020). Among other things, these works do observe media influences (mediatisation) and include communicators but, by contrast, other types of staff again get more attention, and it is hard to find any divisions among the political staffers. In all, policy advisers and media advisers appear to work smoothly in a complementary way. If there are signs of tension between the policy people and the communicators in the interview material, it is more implicit in the analyses. Taken together, these studies provide some support for the claim that media advisers have become more powerful, in any case that they have gained a clearer and more important role and are very close to the respective minister. But the research on "policy professionals" paints a less harmonious picture, also when set against the literature in mainstream political science on Swedish politics and on the core executive specifically. In any government, there is a competition for resources.

The issue of the organization—as opposed to size—of the ministerial staffs deserves more attention. More specifically, the organization of media advice in the core executive has evolved in response to the functional prerequisites. It is an ongoing adjustment in the organization. As I argue in the introduction the cumulative impact may amount to a qualitative change, reflected in the operations of new institutions in the broadest sense. In the process, the media advisory function expanded and acquired a distinct political dimension. The functional pressure from media challenges the government's collective decision-making and unity. It tightens the requirements for ongoing coordination of communication and regarding policy and all kinds of matters.

A largely unanswered question is whether the media advisers, and communication staff more broadly, are involved in the policy process and, if so, how (cf. Svallfors, 2020: 88). Policy and communications are interlinked. It is a question that I will also return to in the empirical analysis.

In this section, I have engaged with one body of literature in terms of how it addresses the role of advisers in politics and with a particular focus on media advisers. One conclusion from this overview of the literature stands out and it is how little it has to say about the role of media advisers. And we know little about their day-to-day interaction with other political staffers. This is where this article moves beyond the state of the art and my work expands the research agenda on how, why, and with what consequences media affects governments and particularly the standing of media advisers.

Explaining media adviser empowerment

More generally, ministerial advisers are an institutional power resource (e.g., Pickering et al., 2024). More specifically, in this article I claim that MMAs have been empowered and that an important part of the explanation for the empowerment of MMAs is linked to the additional functional requirements for communications in government. This argument is based on institutional theory, especially an understanding of institutions informed by rational choice institutionalism,

which explains the creation and form of a particular institution with the benefits it is expected to produce.² Accordingly, the theoretical logic of this argument highlights the demand for functions in governance. A rational functionalist analytical approach stresses concerns about functional efficiency. It emphasises efficient functional responses to external pressures and to internal coordination problems (Johansson, 2022, and references therein). In this view, institutional solutions are driven by a necessary requirement for such functional responses.

In functionalist terms, these responses reflect an essential need to meet the incessant and high levels of demand of the media. It is continuing. It involves strong media exposure of government ministers, especially the prime minister, and tendencies toward politicization of government communication “in the age of digital media and branding” (Marland et al., 2017). As the media has changed the conditions for government communication overall this requires new tasks for the MMAs, and these become more important due to higher demand for these tasks. Obviously, the constant demand of media requires governments to create additional capacity in the system as they face these pressures of media. It involves extensive reinforcements of the government communication framework within which MMAs operate and that they move deeper into political structures. This development has benefited MMAs—not only by offering privileged access to media, but also by expanding the media advisory role and generating institutional change in their favor. More specifically, I suggest that the media presents governments with functional pressures for the conferral of authority, discretion, and resources on MMAs. Each causal mechanism involves adaptation of structures, procedures and practices to the functional prerequisites of media, with implications for the balance of power within the executive. Authority for MMAs to speak for government ministers across a range of issues constitutes a precondition for the role itself. Discretion is required for media advisers to relate effectively to representatives of the media. Resources are added and necessary for MMAs to communicate and coordinate on various issues.

It raises questions, such as what the role of agency is, the human factor in all this, whether actors at various levels shape things. In the case of MMAs, they may themselves contribute to institutional change or adaptation and to the legitimisation of their own authority and of the institutions and organizations where they serve. Therefore, attention should be directed to the everyday work of these staffers, activity and exchange on the ground. Staff groups may be empowered differently by altered institutions.

When it comes to the evolving government communication systems, the people involved in these activities are selected for their professional role, in fact a mix of roles, from adviser to gatekeeper (e.g., Esser et al., 2001; Pfetsch, 2008; Johansson and Johansson, 2022). Much of that is routine and following a quite stable set of roles or functions. Crucially, however, while media adviser is in essence a position that follows a script of what is expected of them, when viewing roles and role conceptions as multidimensional, dynamic, and

nondeterministic, these roles are best understood not as static but as the result of evolving practices carried out by people who then up to a point carve out a professional path for themselves.

Government communication is largely and substantively an unregulated practice where ministerial aides enjoy considerable discretion. Research on the changing role and position of United Kingdom (Whitehall) press officers finds that profound and lasting change in the “rules of engagement” for news management has taken place and is continuing (Garland, 2017; see also Garland, 2021). What they are doing is mainly subject to executive self-regulation.

In the process, an expanded role may lead MMAs to have a hand in government business other than strict communications-related tasks, a role in the wider politics of the government. Communication is central to politically important initiatives and requires an understanding of communication effects of policy. All that in turn may partly explain some of the empowerment of MMAs, why they have been upgraded.

In these executive systems, MMAs have been brought into a prominent political role. It is based on a demand for their services within support structures. The emergence and growth of communications staff suggest that they are really needed, indeed routinised and institutionalized. They have been especially affected by the increasing pressure of media on the government which means, in essence, a need to establish institutions as part of a broader effort to find ways to handle such challenges. All this is putting pressure on governments. An adjustment in organization and patterns of institutional development follow. It is not just a question of adding personnel. Something qualitatively different emerges. The effects are shifts in the institutional balance of power and relationships among staff within the executive of long-term significance.

Method and data

It can be difficult to locate where power lies or assess how much influence particular actors have, especially over time. To uncover the patterns in the data and to maximize the reliability of the findings, special attention was paid to the selection of the interviewees. Between them, they possess considerable experience of how government–media relations have developed in Sweden. The case study of MMA empowerment in Sweden relies on empirical data drawn from in-depth interviews conducted among a representative sample of MMAs and political journalists.³ More specifically, the evidence is drawn from two sets of interviews conducted with 12 acting or former MMAs, based either in line ministries or the prime minister’s office (PMO) and some of them in a managerial role (one acting press chief and three deputy heads of press), one state secretary for policy

² I embrace a broad definition of “institution,” including formal and informal norms, principles, rules, and procedures, as well as organized practices. In other words, institutions are manifested in a variety of forms and refer not only to systems that are organized formally, such as a national legislature or executive, but in a more general sense also to practices or routines, for example.

³ While researching, I had to confront the data problems that hamper the development of research on intra-executive practices. Accessing MMAs proved challenging, especially in the beginning of data collection when some of them were new in the role and there were tensions in the social democratic–green coalition government which took office in October 2014. It has been even more difficult to get interviews with political staff in the centre-right coalition government which came to office in October 2022. When contacted, MMAs at ministries referred to the prime minister’s office, specifically to a deputy head of press.

coordination—together spanning several administrations from 2006 to 2024, governments of different complexions—as well as among 10 political journalists from all major news media. The data set thus includes representation from both government and media organizations in roughly equal shares, and across time.

Interviews were conducted in person in Stockholm, except one telephone interview. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, following a specific interview guide, and interviewees were granted anonymity. The interviews with media advisers and journalists, respectively, focused on core themes such as work routine, forms of communication, and questions related to contacts with journalists/media advisers and how the relationship has changed over time. Interviews involve human relationships and therefore it is not possible to prepare for everything. That said, everyone interviewed was very accommodating and shared their experiences and insights. To supplement the interview data, the study collected material from government documents concerning communications, coordination, and employees. In addition, I have drawn from a news media story about journalistic criticism of the government's "gatekeepers" (Dagens ETC, 2023).

I focus on the media adviser–policy adviser relationship in this one state, over a longer period. I find a striking rise in MMAs. An increasing number of personnel for communications is giving an indication of how one group of staffers has become more important. Larger numbers are a measure of needs and priorities. But they say nothing more about the framework and substance of the function and activities. Beyond the numbers themselves, I use organization as another indicator for observing potential empowerment of the MMAs. The way in which governments organize and manage their communications operation—distribute resources and divide responsibilities—should be a valuable indicator for assessing qualitative change. The use of centralized government communication, when it is moving upwards in the executive, and tightened, is interpreted as a sign of MMA empowerment, as it indicates that executive leadership has reinforced the collective of MMAs and their role in coordinating government communications—and perhaps partly in policy as well. Likewise, additional resources in terms of staff needed for purposes of effectively handling media and communications indicate whether the balance of power between MMAs and policy advisers has shifted.

Case study: media adviser empowerment in Sweden

In this section, I explore media adviser empowerment in Sweden, with a particular focus on the position of MMAs and the balance between media advisers and policy advisers. I present interview evidence on a reinforcement in government communication structures and in the position of media adviser (for further details, see, e.g., Johansson and Raunio, 2020; Johansson, 2022; Johansson and Johansson, 2022; Johansson, 2024). First, I provide a background to understand the needs and developments in government communication.

The Sweden context

To contextualize the Swedish case, there are two major and clear trends over a longer timespan: a steady increase in the number of staff

dedicated to communications, and a strengthening of the government's structures for communication. The resources allocated for government communication have grown significantly and increasingly been controlled by the PMO. These trends reflect the functional pressures from media and are here interpreted as a sign of the need to manage media and communications and create more central control.

The centralization trend is best illustrated by the relocation of the press secretaries' employment from the ministries to the PMO in 2014. The move was not just symbolic but part of a transformation of communications in the wider government. In combination with the introduction of daily morning meetings led by the press chief or one of his deputies, as well as the increase of both this management group and of press secretaries and communicators in general, the development shows a significant strengthening of the centre of government communication.

Yet, compared with the previous governments covered in this study, the centre-right governing coalition which came to office in October 2022 has been partly undoing some of the centralizing strategy. The press secretaries/media advisers are now employed at the ministries, as was the situation before the new and more centralized framework was introduced by the then prime minister in 2014. Moreover, there has been a softening of the procedure of daily meetings among MMAs. Even so, a lot is still controlled from the PMO, which provides overall leadership and has incentives for a unified structure to project control and unity.

And in 2024, amid significant growth in the number of political employees overall, the new staff category "press assistant" was introduced (Altinget, 2024). From zero at the beginning of 2023, 13 press assistants were recruited (up to April 2024) to assist with sending press releases, presence on social-media platforms, and participating at press events, among other things. The number of politically appointed press managers, press secretaries and press assistants in the ministries and the PMO has risen to around 50. This is not to mention the many others, well over 100, who work with communication or information in the government offices, as well as in other government agencies. In addition, a position of state secretary for strategic communication to the prime minister was created in early 2023. There have been examples of political/policy advisers working with media matters, such as more long-term strategic communication, but they have not been included among the government press contacts.

In the Swedish executive system, the staff category of "political appointees," all employed by political contract, refers to ministers, state secretaries and political advisers, including press secretaries (our MMAs). But while press secretaries hence are officially included in the same staff category as policy advisers, as they are usually known internationally, and belong to the same ministerial staff, rather press secretaries/MMAs constitute a category or subcategory of their own, mostly distinguishable from policy advisers.

The formal rules on government communication and press secretaries are quite loose. It raises questions about the discretion of these political operatives and about a possible need to clarify what the role of media adviser entails. And while Swedish political advisers, including press secretaries, have no significant formal executive powers of their own we cannot assess the role and influence of these political appointees by their formal powers alone. For example, an appointee can speak for a minister; one of the fundamental bases of political authority as was noted above.

A qualitative difference, over time, is that press secretaries used to spend their time mainly as intermediary between ministers and journalists and as a kind of service function. Today their jobs are far more political and their roles more institutionalized. MMAs are now a permanent and indispensable part of the government and its offices.

In sum, a prominent development in the Swedish executive over the past decades is the strengthening of government communication. In this section, I demonstrate that MMAs are an important part of this development. In Sweden, as elsewhere, these media advisers are integral to how each prime minister and minister relates to the media.

Below, we will learn more about MMAs and their standing, from what I discovered in interviews with journalists and with MMAs themselves. These views represent two narratives around the central theme of this article: on the development of MMAs as a group of political staffers and the media adviser–policy adviser relationship. This, then, are vital testimonies. I centre on general tendencies in the interview material and draw on individual interviews to exemplify common opinions among the interviewees or that make a point clear.

Evidence from interviews

To start with, 10 interviews with specialist journalists with extensive experience of covering politics highlight the importance of MMAs. The central message from this series of interviews is one of agreement toward the notion of more powerful MMAs. They are perceived to be playing a more assertive role in ministerial staffs and to be centrally involved in the everyday life of ministers. This general message is explicitly advanced by journalists from different types of media.

One journalist, with 44 years of media experience, remarked that it is not the politicians or their officials you contact when you are looking for information: “No, for us it will be the press secretaries in the first place. They are very important...next to the state secretaries, they are the minister’s most important employees.” In the experience of this journalist: “State secretaries are almost never available. And then the political advisers, they usually do not want to talk that much.”

Another experienced respondent, a political reporter with 30 years of experience from covering the government, indicated he also tries to talk to officials and political advisers to get background information. But the officials, at least, usually refer to press departments. And information is more controlled, this interviewee remarked: “You are much more focused on preserving your image and which image should be spread. And you want to have control over just about everything that goes out.” Moreover, now you cannot call ministers directly; “now it is much more controlled, and you have to call a press secretary.” While some ministers are open to speaking to a journalist even if their press secretary is not present, this is not the case for all: “Several ministers would never do such a thing without their press secretary present. It is different from before.”

One political reporter, reinforcing the same theme, shared this illustrative quote: “press secretaries are gatekeepers and see it as their job to protect the minister...” According to this journalist, “everything goes through the press secretary.”

A political reporter, with 20 years of experience in public service, summarized how during these years the press departments “have a much more controlling form. They put in a lot more effort and want to decide what the ministers or politicians will say or not and they

are very keen that it should be the right message.” This reporter explained how the press departments have become much more active in limiting the possibilities to direct contact with politicians and how press secretaries “are like a filter all the time.” And his relationship with the press secretary is “more comprehensive than it was before.”

Another long-term journalist said that the politicians are difficult to access: “Difficult to access and harder to talk freely anywhere.” And now you must go through the press secretaries to get access to ministers and if you want to interview the prime minister.

According to another seasoned political journalist, some MMAs are like “spin doctors,” obviously political. In his view, they have “a self-imposed role” in the government, part of the political leadership. This indicates a large degree of freedom for MMAs in their daily work. In addition, this journalist described the very strong control of the press function in the alliance governments (2006–2014) with a powerful role for the press chief especially in the last term—“it was almost impossible to call an employee to a minister and say we would like to interview...because then you knew that it was reported immediately to this press chief.” According to this respondent, “the hard central control over communication” in the alliance centre-right government, the attempts to prevent leaks and so on, were considered when the red–green government was formed in 2014.

Similarly, a political reporter, with 35 years of media and journalism experience, recalled how prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt’s press chief could be extremely proactive in trying to influence journalists. This journalist further reflected that the practices of most press secretaries also involve information work, which is strategic.

Another political reporter emphasized the importance of good relations with press departments, and of the role of the press secretaries for instance by putting things into context and suggesting which other people might be interesting to talk to. And, she said, the press secretaries “become more active always when it is a conflict, an internal conflict for example.”

As a journalist you want a good relationship with the press secretaries, according to interviewees, and some also explicitly said they have daily contacts with the press departments of the government (or parties). To illustrate, one MMA said: “So you have to have a great relationship with them.”

Worth noting, in this vein, is also how social media has impacted on daily communications routine. It is a tool for both journalists and MMAs to interact and to stay updated on events. The development of communications technology has contributed to changes in daily routine and workload. It has also enabled more direct communication and, for MMAs who have other tools in their box, additional ways to disseminate information and potentially influence journalists and media content.

In conclusion, these interviews offer telling illustrations not only of the nature of the relationship between press secretary and reporter and how dependent these journalists are of MMAs, but also of a trend toward a significant empowerment of MMAs. These experienced journalists have noticed and described increases in government communication resources. Particularly common is the observation that press secretaries have become reinforced and more controlling through stronger efforts to control the political news agenda and to shield the minister. This suggests that MMAs have moved toward involvement not only in strategic communication planning but also in policy discussions, and that they have gained in the process.

We turn now to the 12 interviewed acting or former MMAs, political employees of the government, some of whom with experience of working for the prime minister as well as for portfolio ministers, and a state secretary for policy coordination. Several of the interviewed MMAs stressed the importance of an understanding of politics and political experience. Interviewees working in the centre-right coalition after the 2006 election noted how communication was placed at the executive centre. A top-level MMA from that period said that “all politics is communication” and added: “If you want to have someone who is good as a press secretary, then it must be someone who knows politics.”

An MMA who also worked in the office of the prime minister (during Fredrik Reinfeldt’s first government) observed that “a great deal of what happens is filtered through” those who deal with media matters, and that the prime minister understood the importance of that and told everyone that if he is in a meeting and his press secretaries have to get hold of him, then they can enter whatever meeting he has. And that, this MMA remarked, “is a signal that these matters are central.” According to this MMA, the role goes wider than media relations because “a great deal of monitoring current developments takes place through the press secretary to the prime minister.” It is about news monitoring, but also about responding to questions from media and so on. And this means that you “always have a very close relationship with the prime minister.” Many in the staffs around the prime minister, for example the policy coordination secretariat, “very often came to us” and said that they needed to talk to the prime minister and asked us to help “because we were always with him when he traveled and that meant that people called us very often and, so to speak, we were often the channel to him. I think it is a difference over time that is important to highlight.”

Similarly, a social democratic MMA (2014–2020) believed that he was selected to this position because of his experience of producing policy proposals but also from crisis management and knowledge of the party. For someone outside the party it is more difficult: “I know my colleagues who do not come from the party who come in to work and who do not understand when they cross the line [...] it is, after all, a political environment and a political compass is required, but also political competence.” In similar vein, he remarked that as a press secretary “it is very much about understanding the political context [...] to be able to manoeuvre in a political landscape.”

With such political experience MMAs are more likely to assert themselves in different kinds of relationships, including within ministerial staff where there are ongoing discussions about politics and the media.

Research outlined earlier suggests that political staffs in the 2002–2006 social democratic governments were well welded together. My interviews indicate a similar tendency for the centre-right governments from 2006 to 2014. One MMA, who served throughout this period, testified: “you become quite a close-knit group [...] I think it worked well.” But the change of government in 2014 brought significant institutional change in routines and procedures that affected behavioral patterns. Government communication was much tighter in 2014 than in 2006. The more centralized communication framework adopted when the social democratic–green government came to power in 2014 brought all press secretaries closer to the PMO, where they became employed. In addition, it introduced daily morning meetings led by the head of press at the PMO. These new arrangements appear to have marked a further advance in the empowerment of MMAs. Their authority within the government increased.

It was a framework by which government media advisers/press secretaries became more closely linked to the prime minister, through their employment at the PMO. It increased their status, as indicated in multiple interviews. One explained how the direct link to the prime minister was a change that also meant that press secretaries quit if the prime minister resigns, while the policy advisers (and state secretaries) remained employed by the respective minister and may leave if the minister leaves. The new model emphasized that, as this MMA put it, “you should rather be loyal to the government and not just your minister.” As a result of the new arrangements, MMAs came closer to each other, according to one of them:

There is a press secretary collective. So, if the ambition was to create greater belonging and togetherness between press secretaries and not just in individual staffs around the ministers, then it is something that has been achieved, that you recognise yourself and you share the same everyday as other press secretaries.

The same MMA observed how the daily morning meetings at the PMO contributed to this community or “team spirit” among the press secretaries.

Another MMA—later even higher up in the hierarchy—gave a particularly telling illustration of the assertiveness of a modern MMA. Asked if he usually discusses with other employees who are not responsible for the press about how to communicate with the media, he responded:

It is only me and the minister who communicate with the media, or me first and then the minister. No, they [policy advisers] are not allowed to speak unless I say so. A policy adviser cannot call up a journalist and talk, but that is my role, I am the gatekeeper, so to speak.

According to the same MMA, policy advisers can have background conversations with journalists when he says so, “because I feel that my knowledge is not deep enough in this area.” How much of that can he, as press secretary, control?

It varies from staff to staff, there are those who have been press secretaries in the past, but I would judge that in my case, in the staffs I have been in, it does not occur unless it is at the request of the press secretary ...

According to this MMA, then, nobody else than the press secretary and the minister can communicate with the media; the political advisers are not allowed to communicate with the media. How much a press secretary can control hence varies from staff to staff, and within staffs, but in this understanding political advisers should refrain from speaking with the media, unless approved by the MMA, for instance in the context of background conversations with journalists.

“I am the gatekeeper”—a mode of expression that has given the title to this article and that incidentally suggests a demarcation in ministerial staff. To this point, several respondents stressed that they are like gatekeepers (and journalists shared an impression of MMAs as gatekeepers). To illustrate, an interview with one MMA clearly indicated that journalists who try to circumvent the press secretary will be punished:

There are those who do, and that kind of attempt to sometimes go through our [political] advisers and so on. They will never get access either, because if I discover that someone is trying to trick, then I will close them out, forever. We have an order for how to work ...

This again highlights a situation of assertive press secretaries, generally and in relation to both other political staff and journalists. It implies a kind of system of punishment and reward.

In fact, it is a common observation in interviews with MMAs that they are like gatekeepers. A selection must be made among all inquiries and requests from members of the media. This means that the MMAs act as gatekeepers. In this role, they can determine what information to share with, and to hold from, the media. Thus, they can dictate what news to share with the citizenry.

Interviews also indicate that MMAs are possessing high levels of discretion. As one MMA put it:

I feel that I have a perhaps freer role than I thought when I came here a year ago. That it would be even more controlled [...] It can certainly vary depending on who you work with, but I have a very free mandate from my minister to handle the situation as I want.

Hence, beyond the centralized coordination and control, press secretaries generally have considerable freedom in the daily work.

Finally, there is the interplay between communications and policy. Here I can provide only a few illustrations. There is evidence from interviews demonstrating that MMAs do indeed partake in policy processes. As several interviewees note, they are involved in policy issues and are here brought into contact with policy advisers. As one MMA put it, “we also work with policy development,” together with the policy advisers in the political staff. Similarly, one MMA described constant dialog between press secretaries within staffs and ministries over policy. For example, another MMA explained the proactive joint communications planning, involving the political staff as well as the wider ministry, over the feminist foreign policy adopted in 2014: “It was planned, it was planned.”

One MMA from the 2006–2010 government spoke about continuous monitoring of current developments, including news monitoring, through the press secretary to the prime minister. It is to anticipate what might be on the agenda ahead and to address certain or wider themes, with implications for political content. He testified:

And then there was a conversation between me and the prime minister where we talked about the climate issue, it was certainly not a Moderate [Party] issue... But then we still reasoned that it is a matter where we can play a part.

One highly placed MMA from 2014 onward gave a telling illustration in the interview of the need for coordination between the governing parties across issues and the link between communication and policy and said, “they have to go hand in hand.” Beyond everyday media presence and, in the longer term, the government’s priorities, when it comes to communications content, binding for the entire government, the top media advisers must agree on what is communicated “and that is where the boundary between communication and policy becomes difficult.” When the government must react to recent events, “then we must first come out with

communication before we have a policy ready for it and sometimes that communication must contain traces of what you want to do politically.”

The interview I conducted with a former state secretary for policy coordination, at the top of the policy-making structure, lends additional support to findings in interviews with MMAs about their involvement in policy coordination too. It is especially the head of press, with deputy or deputies, who is involved at this level.

The political coordination is regulated in a government memorandum (Prime Minister’s Office, 2022). Political actions in speeches and the media are normally coordinated by press managers and press secretaries. If a political statement in speech or the media contains new policy for the government, this must be prepared with the respective policy coordination secretariat at the PMO.

In conclusion, among the MMAs themselves we can detect a clear tendency toward a strengthened involvement in communication as well as policy coordination and, as a result, a challenged balance between media advisers and policy advisers. The role of MMAs has been solidified and they are, in effect, their institution’s gatekeeper.⁴ MMAs appear to have converged and developed a more cohesive collective identity. Overall, the respondents described their routine and gave an indication of the blurring of lines between communications and policy. All this suggests MMAs are indeed at the centre not only of government communication but of the entire executive from its core. The result is a new assertiveness among MMAs, as indicated in the interviews.

Conclusion

This article began with the observation that media advisers have been relatively neglected in the study of advisers in politics and, further, that political adviser research has not systematically addressed the relationship between media advisers and policy advisers. As a result, we know much less about how media advisers than policy ones may inform politics and policy. This article has sought to address this gap by developing an argument about MMA empowerment and exploring this argument through a case study, summarizing unique interview evidence. I have tried to broaden the research agenda. More scholarly attention should go toward media advisers.

A central finding from this research effort and the series of interviews is the reinforcement of the MMAs, who have gained in resources and responsibilities. Their continued rise in government is a long-term development largely driven by media and mediated through institutions. Functional conditions from the media environment have worked to reinforce government communication structures and resources, with empowering effects. MMAs have benefited from this development. Adaptation of structures, procedures and practices to the functional prerequisites of media has involved shifts in authority,

⁴ A Swedish newspaper story about the government’s press secretaries provides further evidence of how they have become more important for ministers and gained in power (Dagens ETC, 2023). The article expresses a concern about a development where journalism is increasingly dependent on a good relationship between press secretaries and reporters, meaning press secretaries acting as “gatekeepers” and practically impossible to bypass.

discretion, and resources in favor of the MMAs—with implications for relationships and balances of power within the executive.

The MMAs and journalists interviewed for this study report significant and permanent changes in the way government communication is institutionalized and is increasingly politically controlled, most particularly through centralized media management, after 2006 and continuing up until the 2022 general election and beyond. This suggests that MMAs have become more political, coupled with the functional requirement to meet both ministerial and media needs.

The analysis also underscores that the MMAs have substantial agency to shape the government's procedures and processes to their advantage. The interview evidence demonstrates a more assertive approach from MMAs. MMAs have become more active and controlling toward journalists, and more assertive within ministerial staff. This suggests that MMAs have become more of a category of their own and have converged but diverged from policy advisers. In real-life politics, these are complex categories with many overlapping elements. What gives added weight to one category may be determined by external influences, such as an altered media environment, and these are dynamic. And they are of a general nature.

In terms of a policy role, the analysis also suggests that media has brought about more integration of communication and policy. Therefore, the MMAs have been pushed into policy. And they might take advantage of their strengthened role to influence policy as well. They have become more deeply embedded in political structures, which gives MMAs an opportunity to have policy influence. MMAs are key interfaces for the integration of communication/presentation inputs into the policy process. It is crucial not to overlook this development, which further challenges the traditional balance between media advisers and policy advisers. But additional research is needed to examine the links between them and any connections MMAs might have with policymaking.

From the case presented here one can reach at least provisional conclusions regarding the forces that have brought the MMAs into a prominent political role and it is not only because of the great increase in their numbers. The solid demand for communication professionals and their services in turn derives from media and communication developments of far-reaching consequence. More than to anything else, these political professionals owe their existence and rise to the growth of the media of communication. But the rise of the MMAs is not just a question of media itself. It involves organizational restructuring and qualitative changes to organizational structures. Governments have imposed more organization on the communications effort. MMAs are at the heart of this effort.

These are matters that call for a more extended treatment. It would be informative to compare interactions between media advisers and policy advisers across countries, and not just in Westminster-based systems. Such investigations would reveal whether the structural characteristics of government communication have become more political, as suggested by analysis of Swedish experience. Sweden is no exception. Many national systems across the world are having a similar experience. Similarly, cross-national inquiry could assess whether ongoing adjustments and processes have so redistributed resources and power that the nature of the governmental system can be said to have been transformed into something qualitatively significantly different.

A changing media environment meant that different administrations had to rethink their inner workings. Sweden's changing government communication structures have been growing and tightened. Potentially that could benefit MMAs as well as policy

advisers but is more likely to benefit MMAs and tilt the balance of power to them from the policy advisers. This is not to suggest that policy advisers have all, permanently and everywhere been disadvantaged, that their policy formulation tasks have been taken over by MMAs. As already noted, we can expect there to be much variation in the ways in which individual political staffers have performed their roles. My argument should be understood as a claim about the effects of media on the empowerment of MMAs. Their authority, within the hierarchies, can be challenged.

In the final analysis, though, MMAs have been empowered and this effect is primarily translated through concerns about functional efficiency. Future research, perhaps through a wider repertoire of methods, might reflect on the wider implications of all this for governing and policymaking within and across national cases. Media advisers are still substantially underrepresented in political adviser research. A lack of understanding about their role means an incomplete understanding of political conduct.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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