

Chapter 4

Media and politics in Finland

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Abstract

This chapter depicts developments in Finland during the last decade regarding the interplay between the political system and the media system, both in general and in conjunction with elections. We also suggest central theoretical perspectives through which the developments in Finland can be understood. The theoretical lenses that are discussed as most relevant for the Finnish case are mediatisation and hybrid media theory. Additionally, we provide an overview of the foci and methodological developments within the field of political communication research in Finland. Essentially, as in most of the Nordic countries that this anthology addresses, all three of these areas have undergone changes in Finland during the last decade. Finally, the chapter points out future challenges for Finnish political communication research.

Keywords: Finland, media, political communication, journalism, hybrid media

Introduction

In Finland, the most recent decade has been one of swift and rapid changes when it comes to the political landscape, the structure of the media sector, media consumption habits, journalistic practices, and political communication research. Concerning the political landscape, Finland has, like the other Nordic countries, seen a new rise of electoral support for populist parties. Starting in the 2011 parliamentary elections, the Finns Party (previously named the True Finns Party) suddenly surged in popularity and gained a strong foothold in parliament. This trend continued in the next election in 2015, and the Finns Party was included in the government for the mandate period 2015–2019, followed by a strong election in 2019 too. As we shall discuss, this has broken the long tradition of the Finnish party system being dominated by a “big three” of the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, and the conservative National Coalition Party (Karvonen, 2014; Karvonen et al., 2016).

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Among the democratic corporatist media systems in the Nordic countries, the Finnish media system is arguably the closest to Hallin and Mancini's (2004) liberal model, albeit with clear elements of the democratic corporatist model; however, several aspects have recently changed. The structure of the media sector is increasingly moving from analogue outlets to digital formats. In many ways, one could say that a hybridisation of the media system has occurred since the boundaries between offline and online versions of the same media outlets have blurred, which is also manifested in how digital subscriptions and viewer- and readership have risen. Ownership of media outlets has become more concentrated than before, and the journalistic profession has been forced to adapt to a rapidly evolving and less secure situation than ever before. The media audiences have also changed their habits from the analogue to the digital, and especially the use of social media has surged. This has also been reflected in the extent to which social media is prioritised in election campaigning by candidates and parties. An interesting point is that the Finns Party was one of the first to realise the potential of social media to bypass traditional media in communication with voters. The extent to which voters use online sources when seeking information in conjunction with elections is also a notable trend. Moreover, the rise of social media has been accompanied with elements of what we later discuss as an "elite bubble" of journalists, politicians, and academic experts. These newfound ties between journalists and politicians in social media arguably represent a return to the politics-media coupling of old, albeit with a more critical slant towards the political elite (see Eloranta & Isotalus, 2016; Marttila et al., 2016; Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019; Vanikka & Huhtamäki, 2015).

For political communication scholars, the aforementioned rather quick developments in Finland have brought with them both challenges and possibilities. The old saying of shooting at a moving target has never been more accurate, and it challenges scholars to constantly evolve their methodological skills. At the same time, the availability of massive amounts of data has never been greater. Rather ironically, the challenge is now to understand what research questions the data can answer and by which methods it can best be studied. Thus, the trends regarding what contemporary political communication scholars in Finland focus on, and which research methods they employ, mirror general societal developments and the rising popularity of social media. Regarding these aspects, the role of online filter bubbles and polarisation has become a hot topic, and big data automatically collected from social media is a commonly used type of research data.

In this chapter,¹ we give an overview of these recent developments in Finland. We also apply theoretical lenses for understanding media and politics in Finland and relate the Finnish context to the other Nordic countries. The chapter has five sections and a concluding part. We begin, in the next section, by more closely scrutinising the political system, the recent Finnish elections, and the parties.

The political system, elections, and parties

Finland has often been classified as a semi-presidential system. However, a series of constitutional reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s have gradually removed power from the president, whereby it is now quite a stretch to call Finland a semi-presidential system (see Anckar, 1999; Paloheimo, 2016). In fact, Karvonen and colleagues (2016: 14–15) state that contemporary Finland is “a parliamentary democracy with a government that is accountable to the parliament and a directly-elected president”. Parliamentary elections are held every fourth year, presidential elections every sixth year, and elections for the European Parliament every fifth year. The national parliament is unicameral, with 200 seats. The country is divided into 14 multimember constituencies, where the number of seats in parliament from each district is based on the population size in that district, and one single-member district (the autonomous province of Åland). In presidential and European Union elections, the country as a whole is a single electoral district.

The Finnish multiparty system reflects what has historically been the structural foundations and cleavages in Finnish society (Karvonen, 2014; Westinen et al., 2016): the left-right dimension (the Left Alliance and the Social Democrats versus bourgeoisie parties, in particular the National Coalition Party), the rural-urban (the Centre Party versus the Social Democrats), and, to some extent, the position of the Swedish-speaking minority (the Swedish People’s Party). However, the structural transformation that changed Finland from an agricultural country to a post-industrial society – a process which, in a Western European comparison, took place late (1950s–1960s) and was dramatically rapid – affected the Finnish major parties’ core value base as well as their pool of “own” voters (see Karvonen, 2014). As a case in point, the Agrarian Party (now the Centre Party) used to focus on representing rural Finland, where farmers were the party’s primary support base. Because of the structural changes, less than 3 per cent of the Finnish citizens now work with agriculture, effectively eroding the traditional voter base of the Centre Party. In conjunction with the socioeconomic structural changes, sociocultural dimensions have over time gained a more predominant role in Finnish society and in the party system (Westinen et al., 2016). These dimensions concern issues such as attitudes towards immigration, the European Union, globalisation, the environment, and minority rights. Thus, parties like the Green League were established in the late 1980s without a clear socioeconomic basis. At the same time, the traditional socioeconomically based parties have essentially become, in the words of Kirchheimer (1966: 190), “catch-all electoral machines”, as their traditional bases of voter support have eroded over time. This development has had a profound effect on the campaign messages of these parties. In short, the messages have become vague: the parties no longer appeal to clearly

defined population segments and the use of attacking offensive strategies has declined (Carlson, 2001; Karvonen & Rappe, 1991; Rappe, 1996). This trend still prevails today. The long tradition of forming majority governments (see below) also hampers negative campaigning by the major parties.

A number of specific features are noteworthy in the contemporary Finnish party system (Karvonen, 2014; Karvonen et al., 2016) – the high degree of party system fragmentation is chief among these (typically eight or nine parties are represented in the parliament). Moreover, no single party is nowadays significantly larger than the rest, and no party tends to receive more than 20–25 per cent of the votes, which means that broad coalition governments are needed and formed. In fact, modern Finnish politics has often been a competition between three major parties: The Social Democratic Party, the National Coalition Party, and the Centre Party. In the last three parliamentary elections, though, the populist Finns Party has surged in popularity, breaking the traditional “big three”. Table 4.1 depicts the election results in the last four parliamentary elections and illustrates the rise of the Finns Party (for a longer period, 1945–2011, see Karvonen et al., 2016).

Table 4.1 *Election results, turnout, and governments, 2007–2019*

	2007	2011	2015	2019
Finnish Social Democratic Party (SDP)	21.4	19.1	16.5	17.7
Finns Party (Fin)	4.1	19.1	17.7	17.5
National Coalition Party (NCP)	22.3	20.4	18.2	17.0
Centre Party of Finland (Centre)	23.1	15.8	21.1	13.8
Green League (Green)	8.5	7.3	8.5	11.5
Left Alliance (Left)	8.8	8.1	7.1	8.2
Swedish People's Party in Finland (SPP)	4.6	4.3	4.9	4.5
Christian Democrats in Finland (CD)	4.9	4.0	3.5	3.9
Blue Reform (Blue)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	1.0
Others	2.3	2.0	2.5	5.0
Turnout ^a	67.9	67.4	66.9	72.0
Parties in government	Centre+NCP+SPP+Greens	NCP+SDP+SPP+Left ^b +Green+CD	Centre+NCP+Fin+Blue ^c	SPD+Centre+Left+Green+SPP

^a Per cent of eligible voters living in Finland.

^b The Left Alliance left the government in April 2014 and the Finns Party split into the Finns Party and Blue Reform (later Blue Future) in June 2017.

^c Blue Reform remained in government until the whole government resigned prematurely in March 2019, one month before the upcoming elections.

Source: Ministry of Justice election information service²

The recent populist wave is not, however, the first of its kind in Finland. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the populist Rural Party experienced several good elections that led all the way to a position in two governments in the 1980s. The last row in Table 4.1 illustrates the consensus-seeking nature of Finnish politics, whereby broad and often oversized majority coalition governments have been the norm, in contrast to the other Nordic countries (cf. Karvonen, 2014).

Finland has a proportional election system in parliamentary elections. The feature of that system that has the most bearing on election campaigning and political communication is that Finland has a fully open-list ballot with mandatory preferential voting. Voters have one vote, which cannot be cast for a party list; they are obliged to cast the vote on one particular candidate that they choose from the parties' unranked lists of candidates running in the constituency (see von Schoultz, 2018). The number of votes cast for each candidate determines the ranking order of candidates on each party's list. Consequently, there are two kinds or levels of campaigns (von Schoultz, 2018). Firstly, the party organises a collective national campaign highlighting campaign issues and themes. Over time, these campaigns have become personalised as the party leaders are now one of the most important focal points in the Finnish campaigns and elections (e.g., Karvonen, 2010; von Schoultz, 2016). Secondly, the candidates invest in personal campaigns in their constituencies and usually have their own support groups organising campaign activities, raising money, and generating publicity, including television advertising (Mattila & Ruostetsaari, 2002). These groups generally operate independently from the parties; the local party organisation may function as a background resource and coordinator.

Regarding the costs of campaigning, von Schoultz (2018: 614) notes that this burden has over time "been pushed toward candidates, who collectively spend a considerably larger amount on their individual campaigns than the parties do on their central campaigns". Some estimates (e.g., Mattila & Sundberg, 2012; Moring & Borg, 2005) suggest that the candidates themselves handle as much as 75 per cent of the total campaign spending in an election. Candidates mostly raise campaign funds from donations and private resources (including personal bank loans). This kind of individualised and personalised campaigning by candidates – in combination with Finland's relatively liberal regulation of campaign spending (see, e.g., Hofverberg, 2016) – is a bit of an exception in the Nordic context. Furthermore, it has driven innovation and development in campaigning techniques, especially in the era of the Internet and social media (see Strandberg, 2013; Strandberg & Carlson, 2017).

The media system and general use of media outlets

Similar to the other Nordic countries, Finland fits within Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology as a democratic corporatist media system (see also Skogerboe et al., Chapter 1). However, Finland has differed from most Nordic countries (except, to some extent, Iceland) in the fact that its television system has partially been funded by advertising since the beginning. Looking at daily reach among the Finnish population (Statistics Finland, 2019b), the public broadcaster Yleisradio (YLE) has a share of 54 per cent of the population and the two main private broadcasters, MTV Media and Nelonen Media, have shares of 49 and 42 per cent, respectively. Concerning daily reach of radio, YLE reaches 38 per cent of the population while private radio channels together reach 49 per cent. A general long-term trend towards increased concentration of ownership within all media sectors (print, television, radio, online) has continued in the last decade in Finland (see Grönlund, 2016). For instance, the newspaper market shares are dominated by Sanoma News and Alma Media, television by YLE and MTV Media (and to some extent Nelonen), and the Internet service provider market by Elisa, TeliaSonera, and DNA. In November 2019, the European Commission approved the proposed acquisition of the Bonnier Broadcasting Holding – a television broadcasting company active primarily in Sweden and Finland, owning the Finnish MTV Media group – by Telia Company. This affair is increasing media concentration in Finland; nonetheless, it is worth noting that the media ownership concentration in Finland is, in fact, remarkably low in a global comparison (Noam & Mutter, 2016).

Finns have a reputation of being heavy media users, and while that is certainly still true today, the latest decade has seen a rapid shift towards digital outlets instead of offline outlets. For instance, the circulation of printed newspapers per 1,000 citizens has dropped from 577 in 2008 to only 258 in 2017, and the number of printed and digital newspaper editions is now virtually the same (Statistics Finland, 2019a). In other words, it is only a matter of time before digital editions surpass printed newspaper editions. The number of newspapers with a weekly circulation of at least four issues was as low as 38 in 2018, which is a decline from 49 in 2010 (Statistics Finland, 2019c). Regarding the share of time that Finnish citizens spend consuming media per day, the Internet now dominates with a share of 47 per cent, followed by television with a share of 24 per cent. Therefore, traditional media in Finland has, so to speak, gone digital in the last decade, which is a trend found in most Nordic countries. A parallel development, and one of the explanations for the aforementioned digitalisation trends, is the rapid growth of online media during the same period. As Table 4.2 shows, frequent use of the Internet is as high as 91 per cent among the Finnish population, having grown from 71 per cent in 2008, which is the

highest share of all media outlets. More than half the population, a share that is rapidly growing, also use some form of social media frequently.

Table 4.2 *Active use of media among the Finnish population (per cent)*

Media	Active use
TV ^a	77
TV-set ^b	69
Online ^b	21
Newspapers ^a	58
Printed ^b	43
Online ^b	56
Radio ^a	58
Internet ^a	91
Social media ^a	53
FB ^c	49
Twitter ^d	36
Instagram ^d	54

^a Statistics Finland, n.d.

^b Standard Eurobarometer 90, Data Annex, 2018

^c Internetworldstats, 2020

^d Users in total, 2019 (from Statista 2019a; 2019b)

An interesting aspect of how Finns use “new media” is that these users have clearly matured beyond the early adopter stage. Thus, as Table 4.3 shows, only the oldest age group (aged 75–89) seldom use the Internet while all other age groups use it to a high extent. Moreover, while the youngest citizens are still those who use more advanced online services to the highest extent (e.g., streaming of music or video), the share of middle-aged citizens using such services is substantial.

Table 4.3 *Use of online media according to age group, 2016 (per cent)*

	16–24	25–34	35–44	45–54	55–64	65–74	75–89	All
Uses the Internet	100	99	100	99	92	74	31	88
Music streaming (or similar)	98	90	79	60	37	24	9	58
Broadcasting companies' online services	78	77	76	67	52	45	17	61
Online streaming services (Netflix, etc.)	69	59	42	30	11	4	2	31
YouTube	97	93	88	69	43	25	5	62
Newspapers' or TV-outlets' online news	88	91	93	84	70	57	21	74

Source: Statistics Finland, 2016

In sum, the newspaper sector in particular has had a rough last decade with several outlets closing and many others having economic worries. The shift towards digital platforms for both printed and visual media is now also in full effect, and it is only a short matter of time before online services become the default. All major media providers have adapted to these changes rather swiftly and, tellingly, Finns are still high media consumers despite these massive structural changes.

Contemporary political journalism – trends and challenges

To date, Finland remains firmly among the world-leading countries in the World Press Freedom index. Nevertheless, the aforementioned developments regarding ownership and circulation in the Finnish media sector have had a bearing on the everyday work of political journalists in Finland whereby the increasing tempo, economic troubles, and increasing digitalisation are all aspects that journalists experience hands-on in their everyday work (Pöyhtäri et al., 2016). On the other hand, amidst all the turmoil, Finnish journalists remain firm in their core values where autonomy and professional ethics are at the forefront (Väliaverronen, 2018).

Over decades, Finnish political journalism has experienced what one might call paradigm shifts, ranging from a highly politicised, partisan era, through a phase of neutral observers, or watchdogs, into an emerging and ongoing era of a more active – albeit politically neutral – journalism (e.g., Niemikari et al., 2019; Väliaverronen, 2018). According to Kantola (2012), these macro level shifts are still partially reflected among the views that current Finnish political journalists of different generations hold about their profession in relation to those in power. Kantola distinguishes between three generations of political journalists. The first category is “the solid moderns” (the retiring generation of political journalists), often having a political background before becoming journalists and holding a strong public-service ethos, seeing their role as informing the public about relevant events within the political realm. They are more or less conveyers of the elite’s message to the people. The second group (who became journalists in the early 1980s) is “the liquefying moderns” and can be characterised as professional and neutral, non-partisan observers of society. They put the profession above all else and place great value in a detachment from all things political.

The third generation of political journalists (the current young journalists) is “the liquid moderns”, or as Kantola (2012: 617) also calls them, “the project people”. They are accustomed to the fast-paced, ever-changing nature of the contemporary profession. They often focus on the man or woman in the street rather than the political elite, and one could even say that anti-

institutional values are commonplace among the liquid political journalists (see also Văliverronen, 2018). This new generation thus strongly values autonomy from the political realm but is also more prone to have opinions on societal matters and feel that journalism can be opinionated (see also Reunanen & Koljonen, 2018). Văliverronen's (2018) study of journalists' role perceptions only partially confirms Kantola's (2012) analytical groups, and he remarks that the "guild" of political journalists in Finland remains rather homogenous in its core values and professional ethics. Nevertheless, Reunanen and Koljonen (2018) point out that the youngest generation of political journalists appear to focus more on opinionated journalism than their older peers do.

Whereas core values seem rather stable within Finnish political journalism during the last decade, the broader structural changes in the media sector and shifting platform preferences from print to digital among news audiences have also been felt in the political newsrooms in Finland. Especially the rapid growth of social media is, if not outright upending, at least clearly changing the way journalists carry out their profession (e.g., Pöyhtäri et al., 2016). Having interviewed Finnish political journalists on their views about the growth of online media, Pitkänen (2009) extracts several key points where the journalistic profession is adjusting to the new digital reality. The first aspect is the increased speed of news production. The online world has a much greater need for immediacy that sometimes comes at the expense of journalistic quality. Another circumstance that affects the way journalists work is the increased interaction with the audience and the growth of user-generated content. In a way, interaction is a positive thing, for instance by providing quick feedback on stories, but the uglier side of online discussions, such as toxicity and racism, has increasingly become a problem in Finland. Accordingly, over time, many Finnish outlets have imposed restrictions on anonymous reader comments. Social media and the Internet have also brought with them new types of content such as blogs, tweets, social media posts, and even Voting Advice Applications (VAAs) that often provide political journalists with content for their news stories. A challenge is evident, though, as journalists seek to maintain their political neutrality while at the same time increasingly following and engaging with the political elite through social media (e.g., Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019). A recent broad-ranging challenge for journalism is of course the post-truth discourse (e.g., fake news), whereby the core notion of news being trustworthy is challenged.

Media and elections

We discussed earlier how the onus to campaigns is mostly on the individual candidates in Finland and that this has shown in terms of campaign innovation and rather quick adoption of new campaigning techniques. This has been

especially true regarding all forms of online campaigning ever since the Internet rose to broader popularity in the 1990s and later on in the era of social media (see Carlson & Strandberg, 2012; Strandberg, 2013, 2016; Strandberg & Carlson, 2017). If we consider the main changes in the Finnish campaign landscape since the mid-2000s, the overarching observation is that Finnish campaigns have increasingly “gone digital”. This is not to say that traditional forms of campaigning such as television and newspaper ads, election posters, and rallies have vanished; these are still very much a part of Finnish campaigns (Carlson, 2017; Moring, 2017; Railo & Ruohonen, 2016). Another mainstay of Finnish campaigns that has been unaffected by the digitalisation trend is live television debates featuring party leaders, albeit these debates are now part of a cross-media landscape rather than isolated to one media outlet (see, e.g., Eloranta & Isotalus, 2016).

Nevertheless, it is clear that campaigns in Finland are predominantly moving more and more online and that the parties and politicians have gradually started to think in terms of long-tail campaign logic (Koster, 2009; Strandberg, 2013). Essentially, the key difference between mass marketing and long-tail marketing is that the former seeks to mainly reach a large mass through few outlets, whereas the latter builds its “mass” through an array of narrowly niched campaigned nano messages disseminated through various channels (see Anderson, 2006). Indeed, looking over time at the development of the share of candidates having a campaign presence in various online outlets in conjunction with parliamentary elections (see Table 4.4), the fragmentation of the online campaign sphere is evident.

Table 4.4 *Candidates with online campaign presence in Finnish parliamentary election campaigns, 2007–2019 (per cent)*

	2007 (N = 1,997)	2011 (N = 2,315)	2015 (N = 2,114)	2019 (N = 2,468)
Websites	67	69	61	80
Blogs	34	55	57	42
YouTube videos	6	29	10	15
Facebook	–	88	73	87
Twitter	–	19	51	53
Instagram	–	–	13	41
Other social media	–	–	13	15

Source: All data is original data collected by Strandberg in conjunction with elections (previous publications, e.g., Strandberg, 2009, 2012, 2016).

For each election, there has been an online outlet which has suddenly surged in popularity among candidates running for election: blogs in 2007, Facebook

in 2011, Twitter in 2015, and Instagram in 2019. Taking a more detailed look at the latest campaign leading up to the April 2019 elections, 12 per cent of all candidates used five or more online applications in their campaigns, 38 per cent employed either three or four outlets, and half of the candidates used two or fewer. Throughout all of these elections, the same factors have predicted candidates' online presence: running for a party with plenty of resources (i.e., the traditional big three of the Social Democratic Party, the Centre Party, or the National Coalition Party), being an incumbent MP, having a high education, being young, and being female. As is the case in most developed countries, candidates running for the Greens have been quick to adopt online campaigning in Finland and are at the forefront in innovating online campaign techniques (see Strandberg, 2006, 2016). The Finns Party has also seized opportunities for disseminating its campaign messages via online outlets with highly viral campaigns in both the latest parliamentary and European Parliament elections.

An interesting development – which has also occurred in other Nordic countries – related to parties' and politicians' use of especially Twitter since the 2015 elections, is the emergence of what some observers (e.g., Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019; Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015; see also Fuchs, 2014: 199) call the Finnish “political Twitter elite”. In a way, this symbiosis has grown due to party leaders, other politicians, and journalists gaining from following and engaging with each other (Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015; see also Eloranta & Isotalus, 2016; Marttila et al., 2016; Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019). Twitter is a particularly effective channel through which journalists can, so to speak, smell a news story (e.g., Broersma & Graham, 2012; Verweij, 2012) and corresponds to the need of politicians to gain publicity during campaigns. This development is also interesting since a decreased political parallelism whereby Finnish journalists actively distanced themselves from the political elite was a clear trend in the late twentieth century. In a sense, this newly surged “Twitter bubble” thus represents a shift back towards potentially more political parallelism. Ruoho and Kuusipalo (2019) conclude their social network analysis by stating that the interdependence of journalists and politicians is increasing and forming a mediated elite, which reinforces existing power structures.

As has been evident thus far in this chapter, the general use of online media and the use of online outlets by the political elite has surged in Finland. In this section, we shed some light on how Finnish citizens use various media sources in conjunction with elections. As Table 4.5 shows, the development among citizens has been less dramatic than among the political elite.

Table 4.5 *Citizens' use of old and new media for following elections, 2007–2019 (per cent)*

	2007 (N = 1,422)	2011 (N = 1,297)	2015 (N = 1,602)	2019 (N = 1,598)	2019 (18–24 yrs; n = 135)
Old media					
TV-news and current affairs	66	68	58	65	39
Election debates or interviews on TV	43	53	44	56	36
TV entertainment feat. politicians	24	22	19	26	17
TV ads	34	20	19	n.a.	n.a.
Newspaper columns or articles	49	54	44	48	37
Newspaper ads	40	32	23	n.a.	n.a.
Radio programmes	17	19	18	18	10
New media					
Party or candidate websites	7	10	9	12	23
Online election news	12	27	31	29	42
Online election coverage in general	–	–	11	30	44
Voting advice applications (VAAs)	13	20	26	32	59
Blogs	3	5	6	6	9
YouTube	–	3	8	12	27
Social media	–	9	15	24	44

Source: The Finnish National Election Survey datasets for respective election years. Data for 2007–2015 available at the Finnish Social Science Data Archive.³

One trend is that the use of traditional information sources is strong and stable across time while there is, simultaneously, a clear uptick in the use of online sources. Some indications of the aforementioned general media use trend of online versions replacing offline equivalents can also be seen in the rise of online news sources and online election coverage in general. Among the youngest age group (the column furthest to the right), young Finns' high level of Internet and social media use is also reflected in how they seek election-related information. Thus, VAAs are the most popular, followed by social media, online election coverage in general, and online news. VAAs, which are often provided by both public and private news corporations, were adopted earlier in Finland than in other Nordic countries, with the first one launched already in the 1999 parliamentary election campaign (Mykkänen & Moring, 2006). These have become a popular mainstay and one of the focal points of media attention in contemporary Finnish campaigns. The popularity of VAAs in Finland is understandable, since they provide a

quick and accessible way for voters to find suitable candidates among the several hundred that run for parliament in every electoral district. In fact, 36 per cent of all voters and more than 80 per cent of the youngest voters in 2019 stated that VAAs had influenced their voting decisions “rather much” or “very much”. As we touched upon earlier, Finnish news media often also use the candidate responses to VAAs as sources for news during the campaign. Thus, in a sense, VAAs form one of the cores of the contemporary Finnish election media ecology.

Theoretical perspectives, research foci, methods, and challenges

Hardly surprising, and similar to all Nordic countries, the concept of mediatisation can be deemed as relevant when seeking a broad theoretical understanding of the developments described in this chapter. We argue that the current situation in Finland mostly resembles what Strömbäck (2008) depicts as the third phase of mediatisation. Accordingly, the role of media logic in politics is important but yet to be fully incorporated into everyday politics, and media are still regarded as external to political actors. Finnish parties and their politicians clearly realise the importance of getting attention, but most of them are, so to speak, still learning the ropes regarding the most efficient way to do so. This has been accentuated in the social media era where most parties and candidates know that campaigning in social media is necessary but not all of them know how to get the most out of it. Whether Finland will ever reach Strömbäck’s (2008) fourth phase of mediatisation is hard to tell. In a sense, Finnish society as a whole is less (or more slowly at least) affected by global megatrends depicted in the media – for instance #metoo and #FridaysForFuture – whereby media coverage is certainly vast, but the magnitude of impact on the public, except for certain urban segments of society, is fairly modest. Tentatively, a full-scale mediatisation is therefore unlikely in a society where a certain cultural resistance to new mediated events is evident. This situation is even further accentuated by how Finnish populist politicians tend to have a more critical or sceptical stance towards news media, journalists, and the agenda-setting role of traditional news media. In the 2019 campaign, for instance, a leading and successful theme for the Finns Party was that there had already been enough talk about the climate and that Finland had done more than its share on the issue.

Since the mediatisation thesis is more of a grand theory on the influence of media logic in politics and the public space, its applicability is arguably limited in other areas, for instance in understanding the developments regarding the growth of online media usage in general, the shifts from offline to online news outlets, as well as the increasing role of the Internet and social media depicted in this chapter (see also Schulz, 2014). In that respect, we find that

the concept of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2017) is better equipped to explain the current situation in Finland. Thus, the rapid growth of social media has undoubtedly led to the media logic of old and new blending, while, at the same time, new media has not replaced the old. Thus, new media practices working according to crowdsourced bottom-up logics have emerged and grown alongside the elite-driven traditional mass media practices with the one-to-many logic of communication. To some extent, it is perceivable that traditional media power is challenged by these developments. However, the Finnish mass media broadcasters of old, such as the public broadcaster YLE, other commercial companies, and the bigger newspapers, have adapted rather quickly and now maintain modern state-of-the-art online presences which, as demonstrated in Table 4.3, have quickly become immensely popular among the citizens. Consequently, while still being a society with high levels of news consumption, Finland is in a transition concerning where this consumption takes place, from offline to online platforms. An important observation is that the competition for attention is much more equal in the hybrid media stage than it was in the era of mass media. Rather ironically, media actors themselves are now competing for attention with citizens and politicians, instead of the latter two being dependent on media for being noticed.

In summary, the two broad theories of mediatisation and hybrid media systems emanate an understanding of media and politics in Finland with two levels, one regarding the impact of media logic in the public space and one regarding the contexts of this same space. This forms an analytical framework depicted in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 *Theoretical summary of media and politics in Finland*

		Influence of media logic		
		Low	Medium	High
Primary communicative context	Offline			
	Mixed		Finland	
	Online		↓	

Finland, we argue, is now situated in the middle ground of this interplay between mediatisation and hybridisation. If any prediction for the future is to be made, the obvious development is that the relative influence of the online context will grow even stronger.

We now move from broad theoretical perspectives to what we would call a meta-perspective on the Finnish political communication research field. We provide an overview of the topical and methodological trends during the last decade in Finnish research on political communication. Given how digitalisation has been the major trend in media usage in general, and regarding the use of media in conjunction with elections, it is hardly surprising that the major foci of Finnish political communication research is on social media, and currently especially Twitter. So-called online filter bubbles and their connection to societal polarisation have also been key research topics (see Nelimarkka et al., 2018), and national funding has been granted on the topic to several communication research projects.⁴ Nevertheless, there are still studies in which broader overviews of election campaigns and the public discourse in the media are conducted (e.g., Hatakka et al., 2013; Moring & Mykkänen, 2012; Railo & Ruohonen, 2016) as well as studies of traditional campaign communication such as election posters (Carlson et al., 2017) and political advertising on television (Moring, 2017). The general patterns of online electoral competition within the theoretical framework of normalisation or equalisation (Margolis & Resnick, 2000) are also still studied in conjunction with elections (Strandberg, 2009, 2016). Likewise, Strandberg (2013, 2016) has also studied how voters' use of online media in conjunction with elections correspond to Norris's (1999) well-known perspective of mobilisation versus reinforcement. Rather interestingly, Strandberg (e.g., 2016) has found that the more online campaigning in Finland has matured, the more normalised (i.e., dominated by big parties) it has become, albeit with some indication of mobilisation evident among voters.

The recent wave of Twitter studies (e.g., Eloranta & Isotalus, 2016; Marttila et al., 2016; Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015) has generally focused on describing the topics and scope of Twitter as a space for public discourse, as well as how Twitter mirrors election debates on television (Eloranta & Isotalus, 2016). There is also some emerging research in which both direct and indirect influence of social media on citizens' political engagement is studied (e.g., Suuronen, 2018). As discussed earlier, the findings indicate that something of an elite Twitter bubble is discernible in Finland (Vainikka & Huhtamäki, 2015) even though, as Eloranta and Isotalus (2016) note, Twitter is very much still a marginal phenomenon in Finland. This echoes findings from other Nordic countries (e.g., Larsson & Moe, 2012) and indicates that Twitter is receiving a disproportional amount of scholarly attention. Of course, the main reason for the hype with Twitter studies is the ease through which massive amounts of data can be obtained through the Twitter application programming interface.

This leads us to a second observation regarding the contemporary political communication research in Finland: methodological developments. Above all, big data studies have become common and Twitter is their main focus (see Laaksonen et al., 2013, 2017). In order to study massive amounts of data, several

automated methods of both collecting and analysing data have increasingly been employed. Two interesting trends are how classic social science methods such as network analysis (see Laaksonen et al., 2013) and content analysis (see Nelimarkka, 2019) have been adapted to the social media era. An array of experimental studies in citizens' online discussions have also been conducted in the last decade (e.g., Grönlund et al., 2009; Strandberg, 2015; Strandberg & Berg, 2015; Strandberg et al., 2019). An interesting new development concerning data availability is the fact that some media publishers, such as YLE,⁵ regularly release the underlying data from their VAAs for use by the research community. Moving forward, it seems to us that big data studies of social media will grow even more. The ongoing trend that Finnish political communication scholars predominantly focus on digital media will thus continue as well.

There are, however, some challenges that contemporary political communication research faces. One is, so to speak, to put the "political" back in political communication research. The abundance of available data has brought with it the side effect of making research rather data driven and focused on the communication technology. Rather often, actual research questions seem to be afterthoughts, and theoretical knowledge of political science guiding the analysis of social media data is lacking. A similar backfire effect of the current trend of big data in research is that very few scholars look at the *depth* of political use of social media. Qualitative methods, which would provide depth to the picture of social media in political communication, are seldom used. Other challenges for the field are methodological in nature. Data access has become more difficult in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica scandal and Facebook's decision to close access to its application programming interface. Likewise, the General Data Protection Regulation has imposed restrictions that affect what scholars are able to do with social media data.

Conclusion: Same but different?

In this chapter, we have demonstrated that several broad changes have occurred in the recent decade regarding the Finnish parties and election results, the media habits of the Finnish people, the channels candidates and parties use in campaigns, and the ways in which citizens seek information about elections. Moreover, the hybrid media system is very much in effect by now with all major media actors being active on cross-platform outlets and Twitter serving as an arena for interaction between the political and media elites. Communication scholars have shifted most of their attention to social media, and big data studies are predominant among younger scholars. However, are these developments in any way different from the other Nordic countries, and is Finland still something of an odd case within the Nordic context? In many ways, most

of the abovementioned developments are not unique to Finland. In fact, most chapters of this anthology describe similar changes in their respective countries, in as much as populists have strong electoral support in all Nordic countries, citizens use digital media to an ever-increasing degree, and the coupling between offline and online media is continuously growing. Of course, these trends are not only Nordic, but global. Where Finland still stands out, we would argue, concerns not so much the media-related developments, but the fact that the political system remains an exception within the Nordic context. For instance, the typical Finnish oversized coalition governments have continued to be the norm in the last decade. Moreover, the candidate-centred campaigning, and how this is linked to innovation in campaign communication, also stands out in a Nordic comparison. Additionally, the current trends within political communication research in Finland appear, at least on the surface, to be more streamlined than in other Nordic countries. To conclude, on the one hand, Finland and all Nordic countries are clearly part of global megatrends that, to some extent, render the political communication environments more similar. On the other hand, this chapter, like others in this anthology, shows that every country is unique and adapts these trends to fit the national culture of politics and communication. So, perhaps the political communication systems in the Nordic countries are more similar than they were ten years ago, but, at the same time, they remain different from each other.

Notes

1. We wish to thank professor emeritus Tom Moring for inspiration, some background data, and ideas for structuring this chapter. Needless to say, the content is solely our responsibility.
2. <https://tulospalvelu.vaalit.fi/>
3. 2007 dataset: FSD2269; 2011 dataset: FSD2653; 2015 dataset: FSD3067; 2019 dataset: not yet archived (<https://www.fsd.tuni.fi/en/>).
4. One example of such a project is “BIBU – Tackling Biases and Bubbles in Participation”, led by professor Anu Kantola at the University of Helsinki.
5. See, for instance, <https://yle.fi/uutiset/3-10725384>

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