Rethinking journalist-politician relations in the age of populism
How outsider politicians delegitimize mainstream journalists
van Dalen, Arjen

Published in:
Journalism

DOI:
10.1177/1464884919887822

Publication date:
2021

Document version:
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Go to publication entry in University of Southern Denmark's Research Portal

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

• You may download this work for personal use only.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version.

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim. Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk

Download date: 14. Sep. 2023
Rethinking journalist-politician relations in the age of populism. How outsider politicians delegitimize mainstream journalists

Arjen van Dalen

avd@sam.sdu.dk

Accepted for publication in Journalism

Abstract
The relation between journalists and politicians in liberal democracy is traditionally conceptualized as highly institutionalized, based on mutual dependence, and grounded in a shared culture of jointly respected role relations. While this conceptualization provides a fruitful framework to understand the relation between mainstream journalists and politicians, it falls short in explaining the way outsider politicians, such as Beppe Grillo, Donald Trump, Thierry Baudet or Nigel Farage address the mainstream media. Thus, this paper rethinks the relation between journalists and politicians in the light of the Western political-media environment in the 2010s, where the rise of authoritarian populism, the fragmentation of media audiences, and the fading boundaries around the journalistic profession have substantially changed media-politics relations. The paper aims to make a theoretical contribution by conceptualizing the relation between outsider politicians and mainstream journalists as an ongoing negotiation over legitimacy. Central in this conceptualization is a classification of five strategies which outsider politicians use to delegitimize mainstream journalists: attacking their character; connecting them with other institutions which are seen as illegitimate; attacking their ethical standards; challenging the claim that journalists work in the public interest; and questioning the beneficial consequences of their work. The consequences of these delegitimation strategies are discussed.

Key words: Journalist-politician relations; political communication culture; delegitimation; legitimacy; mainstream; outsider
The way journalists and politicians interact is “a central factor for legitimacy and stability of the democratic process and for the style and quality of the political discourse” (Pfetsch, 2004: 346). This relationship is, in liberal democracies, traditionally conceptualized as an institutionalized relation between two sets of mutual dependent actors, who interact on the basis of mutually respected role relations, within a shared political communication culture (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995: 32, see also Cook, 1998; Gans, 1979; Sparrow, 1999; Pfetsch, 2004). This conceptualization has provided a fruitful analytical framework for the study of the relation between politicians and journalists, ranging from the local level (Baugut et al., 2017) to the supra-national level (Martins et al., 2012), and from national case studies in countries as diverse as Austria, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Spain and Chile (Casero-Ripollés and López-Rabadán, 2017; Davis, 2009; Maurer and Beiler, 2017; Orchard, 2018) to cross-national comparative research (Pfetsch, 2013; Van Dalen et al., 2011).

Yet, this conceptualization seems to fall short when it comes to understanding interactions between, on the one hand, mainstream journalists and, on the other hand, politicians who place themselves outside of the mainstream. The relation between American president Donald Trump and the American press corps lacks the stability which is central in the dominant conceptualization of the journalist-politician relation (Jacobs, 2017). Similarly, a systematic review (Aalberg et al., 2016) showed that European populist politicians discredit the media and that journalists treat populist politicians different than they treat mainstream politicians. This invites us to rethink the relation between journalists and politicians.

This paper aims to make a theoretical contribution by presenting a new conceptualization of the relation between journalists and politicians. In a first step, the paper discusses the traditional conceptualization where journalists and politicians are seen as two mutually dependent institutions. Next, the paper argues that the conceptualization of the press-politician relation needs to be
extended beyond mainstream media and politicians, given the growing importance of outsider journalists and politicians who position themselves in opposition to the mainstream. The paper then presents a new conceptualization where a distinction is made between mainstream and outsider journalists and politicians, and where the interactions between journalists and politicians are seen as a continuous negotiation over the legitimacy of mainstreamers and outsiders (see also Cadha and Koliska, 2016; Carlson, 2016a; Lischka, 2017). While the mainstream politicians and mainstream media might have their conflicts, these conflicts take place within a context where each partner acknowledges the legitimacy of the other side (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). It is argued that the relation between mainstream journalists and outsider politicians is different in that outsider politicians challenge the legitimacy of institutional media (Carlson, 2016b, Engesser et al., 2017: 1191). In a final step, a classification is presented of five strategies, which outsider politicians use to delegitimize mainstream journalists. These five strategies are found in Tweets by four outsider politicians from widely different political contexts. In the discussion section, the democratic consequences of these delegitimation strategies are discussed.

**Conceptualizing journalist-politician relations**

Studies of the relation between journalists and politicians in liberal democracies have a long tradition, going back to the early work by Cohen (1963), Sigal (1973), Hess (1981) and Gans (1979). Later, Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), Cook (1998), Sparrow (1999), as well as Pfetsch (2004) provided fully developed analytical frameworks to understand the relation between politicians and the press.¹ These frameworks have their roots in sociology and political science, in particular in work on role theory and institutionalism (Cook, 1998; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995; Schudson, 2002). They see political organizations and media organizations as two sets of social institutions (Cook, 1998). Within these institutions, the behavior of individual actors is not only
RETHINKING JOURNALIST-POLITICIAN RELATIONS

guided by the formal structures of the institutions but also by informal rules and unspoken routines. Consequently, there is a large degree of “trans-organizational agreement” (Cook, 1998: 64).

Journalists across news organizations, for example, follow similar news values and news-making routines. Although the leverage political actors have over the press differs from politician to politician, there is also a large degree of similarity in the goals which politicians pursue in their relationship with the press and their approach to the press (Author, 2010). Another defining characteristic of a social institution is that it fulfills an important role in society (Cook, 1998). Politicians facilitate democratic representation and political decision making while the media provide the people with trustworthy political information.

For social institutions to fulfill these roles, they need authority. Political organizations such as the legislature or the judiciary derive their authority to a large degree from formalized rules laid down in the constitution. Media organizations, on the other hand, lack such formal rules from which journalists could derive their authority. For example, no license is required to call oneself a journalist (Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011). Instead, for journalists legitimacy establishes the “authoritative base for accounts of ‘the way it is’” (Eason, 1988 in Carlson, 2016a: 361). Legitimacy can be defined as “a generalized perception of assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions” (Suchman, 1995: 574). Following Dowling and Pfeffer (1975), Tong (2018: 257) argues that legitimacy is “the source of justification for the acts of social groups or organizations, and with it they can make their acts acceptable to other member in a society”.

Journalists can for example claim legitimacy by following professional routines, adhering to guiding principles such as the objectivity norm, and explaining that they work in the public interest (Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011). Hanitzsch and Vos (2017) see journalism as a discursive institution, where legitimacy and authority are not only determined by professional routines and actions, but
also by the way the journalistic community and actors outside the media define, discuss, criticize and defend journalism and its role in society (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Lischka, 2017; Zelizer, 1993).

Following this perspective, journalists and politicians are seen as mutually dependent institutions. Each side has something to offer to the other side and is indispensable for the accomplishment of the goals of the other side (Sparrow, 1999). To make use of the resources the other side has, both sides benefit from cooperation, and will to a certain degree adapt to the expectations and logics of the other.

To make this relation work, it is regulated by adherence to normatively prescribed roles. Journalists work on the basis of role conceptions (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017), such as the desire to provide a balanced account of current affairs, give politicians a platform to reach their citizens, or act as watchdogs of government. Similarly, politicians are expected to interact in specific ways with journalists, like being available for questions and explaining policy decisions (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). The divergent roles of the journalists and politicians will on occasion lead to adversarial relations and conflict, but at the same time the normatively prescribed roles make sure this adversarialism takes place within a context where each partner acknowledges the legitimacy of the other side (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). If either journalists or politicians would not acknowledge the legitimacy of the other, the relation would become unworkable.

Finally, these role relations are embedded in a shared political communication culture grounded in shared overarching values, like a common understanding of fairness, balance, or objectivity and a common interpretation of the appropriate way for journalists and politicians to interact (Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017: 121; Pfetsch, 2004). For example, Canel and Sanders (2006) have shown that in certain media systems specific topics, primarily related to the private life of politicians, were seen as off topic by both the media and politicians. Within the mutually respected
boundaries of this culture and adhering to the corresponding roles, both actors can oppose one another without the system collapsing. This gives the journalist-politician relations a large degree of stability.

The outcomes of this stable shared political communication culture are generally seen as beneficial for democratic society, since it makes sure that politicians are held accountable and that citizens stay informed about political developments. This type of political communication culture has been criticized though, in particular for being inwards-oriented (See Schudson, 2002) and out of touch with the general public (See Baugut et al., 2017; Mazzoleni, 2008).

This stable shared political communication culture is dependent on specific conditions, in particular low levels of internal competition among politicians and among the media (Cook, 1998; Ladd, 2012; Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995). Under low levels of competition, everyone benefits from a stable collaboration. When there is more internal competition, the media and politicians act less as unified institutions, which in turn affects relations with their counter-parts. In a historical analysis, Ladd (2012) concludes that the symbiotic relation between American politicians and the press is historically not the norm. It was not until the first half of the 20th century that institutional media were “temporarily accepted into the political system” (Ladd, 2012: 52). As political polarization grew in the United States, attacks on the institutional media increased, initially coming primarily from politicians outside of the mainstream. At the same time, a fragmentation of the media system led to alternative media sources, such as conservative talk radio or left-wing websites that distanced themselves from the mainstream media and political establishment (See also Peck, 2019). Blumler and Gurevitch (1995: 211) also concluded that their description of a shared political communication culture in the United Kingdom mainly applied to a period when media were under limited commercial pressure.
Journalist-politician relations in the age of populist politics

In the 2010s, there have been broad changes in the media, politics and society which further challenge the conceptualization of the journalist-politician relation as a role-regulated relation between two mutually dependent actors within a culture of shared values (e.g. Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Van Aelst et al., 2017). These changes are partly a continuation of the fragmentation of the media system and political polarization which took place at the end of the 20th century and partly the result of new developments. Due to technological developments such as the rise of social media, the number of channels and sources of information further increased, and audiences have become more fragmented (Bennett and Iyengar, 2008). This further diminished the audience reach which the mainstream media once had and enlarged the reach of alternative sources outside of the mainstream (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The rise of social media also gives politicians more possibilities to communicate directly with the public. Although Facebook and Twitter offer politicians new platforms where they can communicate directly with their followers, the mass media and especially television continue to occupy a central role in political communication (Chadwick, 2017; Casero-Ripollés, Feenstra and Tormey, 2016). However, when used strategically social media give politicians more control over public debate and media coverage (Broersma and Graham, 2013). Thus, the current political-media system can best be described as a hybrid, where a combination of old and new media logics determines how journalists and politicians interact, and with which effect (Chadwick, 2017).

Due to the increased competition from other sources of information, the boundaries around the journalistic profession are fading (Lewis, 2012). Bloggers, amateur journalists and the general public have more possibilities to fulfill some of the same functions which journalists fulfill. Such developments challenge the authoritative position that the media once had as central gatekeeper and the main provider of public information (Carlson, 2016a). In several Anglo-American and former...
communist countries, this is accompanied by a decline in trust in the press, further undermining the position of the mass media (Hanitzsch et al., 2018).

In these countries, the decline in trust in the media is mirrored by a similar decline in trust in liberal political institutions (Foa and Mounk, 2017). Across Europe and in the United States, we see a parallel rise of (mainly right-wing authoritarian) populist politicians (Aalberg et al., 2016; Norris, 2017: 10). Populist politicians position themselves as representatives of the people against the elites and the establishment (Norris, 2017: 10). Mudde (2016: 25-6) describes populism as “an ideology that separates society into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite,” and that holds that politics should be the expression of “the general will” of the people.” The rise of populist parties has been explained by people’s aversion of the way centrist politicians have handled recent societal changes and developments like immigration, or the global banking crisis which started in 2008 (Mudde, 2016).

Scholars have pointed to recent developments in capitalism and neoliberalism as broader socio-material explanations at the macro-level underlying these trends in the media system (Phelan, 2014), the blurring boundaries around the journalistic profession (e.g. Berglez, 2018) and the rise of populism (Ibsen, 2018). Combined, these changes challenge the central assumption underlying the dominant conceptualization of journalist-politician relations. The media and politicians function less as two unified institutions, as the values which guide people’s actions within each professional side have diversified.

Political polarization and the rise of populist parties challenge the idea that the different parties in the political system function as one institution. Instead, a distinction should be made between mainstream, establishment politicians, on the one hand, and outsider, anti-establishment politicians, on the other hand. While the policy views of different establishment parties may vary, they are joint together by their acceptance of the formal and informal ground rules underlying the
political system (Abedi, 2004; Sartori, 1976). Anti-establishment parties position themselves in opposition to all parties that traditionally form the political establishment (Abedi, 2004: 12). These anti-establishment parties challenge the democratic foundations of the whole political system, for example by arguing for changes in the constitution which would weaken representative political institutions in favor of more direct democracy and a stronger executive (Abedi, 2004: 15; Foa and Mounk, 2017, Mackie, 1995: 165). These outsiders also challenge the prevalent political norms and democratic values (Foa and Mounk, 2017) for example by fostering mistrust towards the judiciary or challenging the legitimacy of elections (Norris, 2017). Also individual politicians can position themselves as outsiders and challenge the establishment within their own party and in other parties.

At the same time, journalism can no longer be seen as a single institution, since outsider journalists position themselves in opposition to mainstream journalists working for legacy media. Mainstream journalists are journalists who work for legacy mass media that traditionally fulfil an agenda-setting role. Due to the organizational and professional routines by which these journalists work, there is a large degree of similarity in practice and output among mainstream news organizations (Cook, 1998). Public service news broadcasts like the German *Tagesschau* or newspapers of record, like the *New York Times* are considered mainstream media. Alternative outlets which have emerged with the fragmentation of the media system, like conservative talk radio or extreme left-wing blogs, challenge the mainstream media. They have different journalistic values and break with the routines of mainstream journalism, for example by being openly partisan, employing fierce attacks on political opponents, and serving as echo chambers for the audience (Jamieson and Cappella, 2008). Danish *Newspeak* or American *Breitbart News* would be newer examples of such outsider media.

Given these more diverse sets of values within each professional group, it also becomes more difficult to talk about one overarching political communication culture across the
different groups. During the 2016 American Presidential elections, this decline of a shared
overarching culture was clear as politicians openly questioned the purpose of the press, and
journalists and politicians ridiculed the other side (Jacobs, 2017). In Europe, right-wing populist
politicians use social media for fierce attacks on so-called media elites, in particular on public
service broadcasters (Engesser et al., 2017). Journalists struggle with how to deal with these
populist politicians (Esser et al., 2016: 376).

**Journalist-politician relations as a negotiation over legitimacy**

In practice, the distinction between mainstream and outsider is more of a continuum than a
dichotomy. Nevertheless, the boundary between the mainstream and outsiders plays an important
role in the way journalists and politicians interact in the age of populist politics. As argued above,
mainstream journalists require legitimacy to fulfill their role as a societal institution. Outsider media
and outsider politicians challenge the legitimacy of institutionalized practices. Therefore, the
relation between journalists and politicians in the age of populist politics can be understood as an
ongoing negotiation over legitimacy (Carlson, 2016a). This perspective recognizes that institutions
are not inherently legitimate, but rather that their authoritative basis is subject to debate and
contestation. Legitimacy needs to be continuously reestablished. Mainstream and outsider
journalists as well as other societal actors including politicians take part in the negotiation over the
legitimacy of mainstream media. This negotiation takes place in the daily interactions between
journalists and other actors as well as in meta-journalistic discourse, which can be defined as
“public expressions evaluating news texts, the practices that produce them, or the conditions of their
receptions” (Carlson, 2016a: 353). Such a meta-journalistic discourse can be found in journalism’s
trade journals or in letters to the editors, but also in speeches, interviews, or social media messages
where politicians talk about the media.
In this negotiation over journalistic legitimacy, mainstream actors and outsiders take different positions. On the one hand, mainstream journalists take themselves as a starting point and highlight their own strengths in order to claim legitimacy for themselves (Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011). They protect the boundaries around the profession by referring to institutionalized practices, highlighting the routines and norms which they rely on (Lewis, 2012). Through this legitimation, they establish or repair the authority to fulfill their societal role of providing the public with trustworthy information (Carlson, 2016a).

On the other hand, outsiders focus less on themselves in the negotiation over legitimacy, but instead derive authority through delegitimizing mainstream institutions. Journalistic delegitimation is understood as a specific type of media criticism, where critics attack the press as a whole and challenge the media’s claim to legitimacy. Outsiders “define themselves in opposition to the prevailing ideological and organizational structures” (Taggart, 1996: 1). When delegitimizing institutionalized practices, outsiders claim so-called vernacular authority for themselves based on their distinctness from the mainstream (Howard, 2013). Conservative outsider media, for example, accuse the institutional media of a liberal bias and of being part of the cultural elite, while left-wing outsider media accuse these establishment media of a conservative bias and of being part of capitalist elites (Ladd, 2012: 83). By doing so, outsiders present themselves as viable alternatives. They appeal for trust in their actions specifically based on them not “relying on any authority arising from formally instituted social formations like a church, a newspaper company or an academic journal.” (Howard, 2013: 81).

This negotiation over legitimacy does not only take place between mainstream journalists and outsider journalists, but also in the interaction between mainstream journalists and politicians. By aligning with each other within the common political communication culture based on shared values and norms, mainstream journalists and mainstream politicians strengthen each
other’s legitimacy and authority (Boulding, 1971: 420; Lowrey, 2011). Outsider politicians challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalists when they attack the press and its main institutions on social media or in speeches (Engesser et al., 2017; Lischka, 2017). In doing so, they can claim authority for themselves, especially when they depict the mass media as belonging to the same establishment which also mainstream political parties are part of. Outsiders can then claim to truly represent the people since they are not part of this establishment. While previous research has shown that outsider politicians indeed discredit the mainstream media, descriptions of how this is done are often either context-dependent (see Aalberg et al., 2016 for an overview), or part of broader analyses of populist rhetoric (e.g. Engesser et al., 2017). In the next section, a five-fold classification is presented of general strategies that outsider politicians across different political contexts use to delegitimize mainstream journalists.

**Outsider politicians and mainstream media: strategies of delegitimation**

The classification of strategies which outsider politicians use to delegitimize the media is based on strategically selected tweets in which outsider politicians attack the mainstream press. Following a most different systems design, Tweets were chosen from outsider politicians who work in diverse political context, with diverse political roles and with different degrees of political success. These politicians were Italian political activist and founder of the *Five Star Movement* Beppe Grillo, American President Donald Trump, Thierry Baudet from the right-wing party *Forum voor Democratie* which received 1.8% of the votes in the 2017 Dutch parliamentary elections after positioning itself during the campaign as a challenger towards mainstream political parties; and British MEP Nigel Farage, who lead the *UK Independence Party* and campaigned for Brexit in the 2016 British referendum. These four diverse politicians have in common that they want to challenge the status quo and position themselves in opposition to the political establishment. These diverse
politicians were chosen in order to identify common strategies that are not context-specific, but used by outsider politicians across liberal democracies. Tweets were chosen as data source to analyze the rhetorical strategies of outsider politicians towards the mainstream media, since tweets provide an unfiltered expression of their views (see also Engesser et al., 2017; Waisbord and Amado, 2017). The analysis is only based on tweets sent during the period that the politicians were politically active until the moment of data collection (1 September 2017). For each politician, tweets were sampled which included the terms “journalist*”, “media”, “news” or the names of major mainstream news organizations in the respective countries like the BBC or RAI. The tweets by @realDonaldTrump were downloaded from http://www.trumptwitterarchive.com, while the tweets from the other politicians were found through the advanced search function on Twitter.

The objective of this analysis was to identify and classify delegitimation strategies, rather than to quantify how often outsider politicians use each of these strategies. First, following Lischka (2017), analytical categories were derived from the literature on legitimacy. Based on key literature on legitimacy of professions in general and journalism in particular (Abbot, 1988; Boulding, 1968, 1971; Carlson, 2016a; Lewis, 2012; Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011; Suchman, 1995; Tong, 2018), five categories of legitimacy claims were identified: professions can claim legitimacy with reference to the character of the professionals (Abbot, 1988) by building connections with other legitimate institutions (Boulding, 1968: 12), by highlighting the ethical standards which they use in their work (e.g. Tong, 2018), with reference to constituents (the people that benefit from their work) (e.g. Abbott, 1988), and by pointing to the beneficial outcomes of their work and the democratic functions which they fulfill (e.g. Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011: 329). Next, following Engesser et al. (2017), the sample of tweets was scanned using the identified types of legitimacy claims as heuristic categories. In this way, tweets were identified where outsider politicians attack the press as a whole or its prime institutions (such as public service broadcasting organizations) and directly challenge
the five types of claims for legitimacy. Typical examples of these tweets from each politician are depicted in Table 1.

These strategies are not necessarily the only delegitimation strategies used by outsider politicians, since outsider politicians might use additional context-specific strategies which resonate with the political culture or political situation of the political-media system in which they operate. Examples of this would be the use of the term ‘Lügenpresse’ in Germany (Koliska and Assmann, 2018), or reference to fake news in the United States (Lischka, 2017).

The first source of legitimacy of mainstream journalists which is attacked by outsider politicians is their character. Max Weber and others have argued that the personality, character, and charisma of professionals is an important source of their legitimacy (Abbot, 1988, see also Boulding, 1971). When professionals are perceived to have positive character traits like integrity, honesty, or willingness to take responsibility, this will make it more likely that people will trust them and rely on their authority. Tong (2018) highlights competency as a source of legitimacy of journalists. Each of the four outsider politicians delegitimized the mainstream press by attacking the character of journalists, calling them lazy, arrogant, dumb, or old (See Table 1).

Institutions can strengthen their legitimacy by building connections between themselves and other legitimate institutions. Boulding (1968: 12) talks about “legitimacy syndromes in which one institution derives legitimacy from another with which it associates itself.” The legitimacy of mainstream journalists is maintained and confirmed in their interactions with mainstream politicians within a shared political communication culture. Outsider politicians turn this logic around and delegitimize the media by referring to this connection (See Table 1). The outsider politicians linked the media to mainstream politicians, political ‘elites’, and to political insiders in a negative way. Grillo, for example, talked about the ‘journalists of the regime’ implying that mainstream media do not keep their professional distance from politicians, but are rather political insiders associated with
the establishment which is out-of-touch with ordinary people. Thus, by connecting the mainstream journalists that other institutions which are seen as illegitimate, the legitimacy of these journalists is questioned. Going one step further, the mainstream media in the United States and the Netherlands were criticized for being left-wing or supporters of left-wing politicians. In addition, associations were made with other ‘elite’ actors seen as out-of-touch with the general public, like academics or unelected officials.

Ethical standards are another important source of legitimacy for a professional group. For the outcome of the work of a profession to be accepted by the public, “results have to be reached in a culturally approved manner” (Abbott, 1988). For journalists, the professional norms, conventions, and ethical standards are important sources of legitimacy (e.g. Carlson, 2016a; Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011; Tong, 2018). Journalists argue that they should be seen as authoritative providers of information by referring to professional principles like objectivity, balance, fairness, or neutrality. Outsider politicians refer to these same professional principles to delegitimize the mainstream media (See Table 1).

Outsider politicians refer to journalistic principles like fact checking, being objective, unprejudiced, relying on facts, and argue that the mainstream media do not follow these standards. Thus, the same ethical standards which journalists use to argue for their legitimacy are used against them. Outsider politicians criticize the media for not living up to the high ethical standards which journalists claiming to have.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Strategies used by outsider politicians to delegitimize mainstream journalists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Character</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I would like to create a retirement home for old journalists who are in difficult situations.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Only the journalists of the regime could twist the meaning of the words in this way: goo.gl/0RZW0</strong> (3 February 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>It is asked of all journalists to adhere to the ethical and deontological rules of the profession. Look at this ... <a href="http://fb.me/2dt0ss8Di">http://fb.me/2dt0ss8Di</a> (11 May 2013)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Newspapers and the media did not help citizens to understand the real issues. Such as this: <a href="http://goo.gl/8OpJ1">http://goo.gl/8OpJ1</a> (19 May 2013)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inform everyone you know! You have to do it! The media do not report one word of this ... <a href="http://fb.me/2WOqaz8Lo">http://fb.me/2WOqaz8Lo</a> (2 May 2014)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Beppe Grillo: @beppe_grillo and @Mov5Stelle; Donald Trump: @realDonaldTrump; Thierry Baudet: @thierrybaudet and @fvdemocratie; Nigel Farage: @Nigel_Farage*
Another way in which professions can claim legitimacy is by referring to their constituents; the people who benefit from the work of the professionals (Abbott, 1988). Doctors can for example refer to their patients, and lawyers to their clients. Similarly, journalists refer to their duty to serve the public to justify their actions when faced with criticism (Skovsgaard and Bro, 2011). Each of the outsider politicians challenges the image of journalists as servants of the general public (Table 1). The presented Tweets by Baudet and Grillo directly contradict this idea that journalism benefits the general audience. Hereby they weaken the claim that the actions of journalists are justified because they are to the advantage of the general public. Trump’s claim that the media are the enemy of the people goes furthest in undermining the claim to legitimacy with reference to the constituents of the journalists.

The beneficial outcomes of the work done by professionals is a fifth important source for professional legitimacy. From a utilitarian perspective, fulfilling an important function to the benefit of the greater good and society at large is a source of justification for the actions and privileges of a professional group. Ideally, journalism facilitates public debate and provides relevant democratic information. Journalists can refer to the beneficial democratic outcomes to legitimize their special position in society and claim authority for themselves (e.g. Strömbäck, 2005). Outsider politicians delegitimize the press by challenging the positive democratic consequences of journalism (See Table 1). In the highlighted examples, Farage and Grillo challenge the idea that the media provide the citizenry with the relevant information which it needs to be self-governing, arguing that there is important information that goes unreported. Trump directly oppose journalists’ claim of legitimacy based beneficial democratic outcomes by arguing that the press damages rather than benefits democracy.

Conclusion
This paper has argued that recent technological, societal and political developments make it necessary to rethink the traditional conceptualization of the journalist-politician relation. The paper presented an extended conceptual framework of this relation where a distinction is made between mainstream and outsider journalists and politicians, and the relation between the two types of actors is seen as a negotiation over legitimacy. In line with the traditional conceptualization of the journalist-politician relation, mainstream journalists and politicians derive mutual legitimacy from their interdependence. Outsider politicians challenges the legitimacy of mainstream media institutions, because they derive their own authority from distinguishing themselves from the establishment. Outsider politicians in different political settings use five rhetorical strategies to delegitimize mainstream journalists: attacking their character; connecting them with other institutions that are considered illegitimate; attacking their ethical standards; challenging the claim that journalists work in the public interest; and questioning the beneficial consequences of their work.

This negotiation over legitimacy has first of all become an important aspect of the journalists-politician relation because of the long-term trends of political polarization and media fragmentation (Ladd, 2012). Additional developments in the 2010s have intensified these developments. Social media have given populist outsider politicians new platforms to express their critique of the mass media directly to their core supporters. Since the boundaries around the journalistic profession have become blurred due to growing competition from amateur journalists and professional communicators, legitimacy has become a more important asset for mainstream journalists. At the same time, low levels of media trust further undermine the authoritative position of the mainstream media (Van Dalen 2019).

Given this situation, it can be expected that these delegitimation strategies by outsider politicians trigger a reaction from mainstream journalists as well as mainstream politicians.
Mainstream journalists will defend their own legitimacy in the face of criticism from outsiders and may re-legitimize their own position by discrediting outsider politicians. Mazzoleni (2003: 16), for example, observed that journalists “tend to adopt a law-and-order attitude and to use their journalistic weapons for the defense of the status quo when it comes under attack from anti-establishment forces, such as protest groups and populist movements.” However, normative obligations may place mainstream media in a limbo when it comes to dealing with delegitimation claims from outsider politicians. Fairness and balance norms or the requirement to inform the public may require mainstream journalists to give attention to the words of outsider politicians, even though attention for these extreme views in the mainstream media might legitimize outsider politicians in the eyes of the public. Future research should look further into how journalists deal with this dilemma and study whether mainstream politicians use similar delegitimation strategies as outsiders. Mirroring how the policies of mainstream parties are affected by competition from populist alternatives (Rooduijn et al., 2014), it could be expected that over time mainstream politicians on occasion also start using a delegitimizing rhetoric vis-à-vis mainstream media when they feel that this resonates with the audience.

This paper has mainly focused on the relation between mainstream journalists and politicians, but future work could also study outsider journalists and their relationship with politicians as a negotiation over legitimacy. It could be expected that shared political communication cultures emerge between outsider journalists and outsider politicians which mimic the relation of the mainstream counterparts, where each respects and supports the legitimacy of the other. Outsider media could strengthen their own position by delegitimizing mainstream politicians.

Meta-journalistic discourse, and in particular Twitter, is only one arena where journalists and politicians engage in negotiation over legitimacy. Observation studies and content analyses are needed to further investigate how this negotiation plays out in the day-to-day
interaction and how it influences media content. Outsider politicians ‘walk the talk’ and further challenge the legitimacy of mainstream journalists when they do not invite them to press conference, do not give access to election events, or ignore requests from the media for interviews and instead communicate directly with the audience on social media. On the other hand, it is not unthinkable that outsiders harshly challenge the media’s legitimacy in public, but still develop a working relationship with journalists behind the scenes.

An interesting question is whether outsider politicians moderate their delegitimizing rhetoric once they have made it onto the political scene. On the one hand, it could be expected that delegitimation strategies will be used primarily in the insurgent phase, when outsiders first appear in a political-media system and need to establish themselves as outsiders (Mazzoleni, 2008). On the other hand, once outsider politicians have acquired a position of power, they might keep using delegitimizing strategies to undermine the authority of the critical press and in that way reduce the impact of criticism. In addition, it may be difficult to change one’s relation with the mainstream press once outsider politicians have become known by the audience for their delegitimizing rhetoric.

Such questions are important to study because of the damage which the delegitimation of the media can do to democracy. First of all, it can be expected that the delegitimation strategies used by outsider politicians towards mainstream journalists lead to a polarization of media and political trust. When outsider politicians delegitimize the mainstream media, this might strengthen the hostile media effect (Hartman and Tanis, 2013) and make strong partisans distrust the mainstream media and by extension mainstream politicians. When a large part of the population does not trust the mainstream media, this goes at the expense of a shared understanding of reality which forms the basis of sound democratic debate. Second, delegitimation of the mainstream media by outsider politicians might further erode the stable political communication culture guiding
journalist-politician interactions. Despite the danger that such a political communication culture could lead to overtly inwards-oriented political reporting, it also had clear democratic benefits. When politicians become increasingly hostile of journalists it will be more difficult for the press to hold them accountable. Third, delegitimation directly challenges the authoritative basis of the press as an institution. When delegitimation rhetoric becomes mainstream it is more difficult for the press to justify and defend their special position in society. Ultimately, when in a position of power, outsider politicians could further weaken the position of press by putting rhetoric into practice and tighten regulation of the press or cut press subsidies. Thus, although it is often said that words do not hurt, delegitimation of the mainstream media can do real damage to press freedom and democracy.

Endnotes

¹ While these frameworks have been used in numerous empirical studies of the journalist-politician relation, other ways of conceptualizing this relation have been proposed as well (e.g. Donohue et al. (1995; Mancini, 1993).

² The following accounts and periods were analyzed: for Beppe Grillo: @beppe_grillo and @Mov5Stelle (since the foundation of the Five Star Movement on 4 October 2009 until 1 September 2017); for Donald Trump: @realDonaldTrump (Since the announcement of his Presidential candidacy on 16 June 2015 until 1 September 2017); for Thierry Baudet: @thierrybaudet and @fvdemocratie (Since the announcement of his political ambitions on 26 September 2016 until 1 September 2017); and for Nigel Farage: @Nigel_Farage (Since joining Twitter on 15 January 2009 until 1 September 2017).
References


