Media, Democracy and Small States:
Political Communication in Iceland

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Declaration of Authorship

I, Jón Gunnar Ólafsson, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date:

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Abstract

This thesis examines the dissemination of political information in Iceland through an investigation of three interlinked and under-studied areas of research in the country. The research gaps concern perceptions of routine political news coverage, the politician-journalist relationship, and the impact of social networking sites on interactions between the public, journalists and politicians, as well as on news coverage of politics. The data in this mixed methods study is comprised of 50 semi-structured interviews with Icelandic politicians and journalists, and survey answers from a representative questionnaire (N= 1,264). In filling these research gaps, the Icelandic case is used to expand existing paradigms. Iceland has been routinely ignored in the comparative political communication literature, and the same goes for other small states. The thesis illustrates how qualitative differences between small and large states open up new areas of investigation.

The findings demonstrate that the Icelandic legacy media is perceived to be breaking down and routinely bypassed in political dissemination. The smallness of the Icelandic society means that there is much more direct interaction between politicians, journalists and the public than in larger states. This happens in informal settings offline, as well as online, particularly on Facebook. In order to study these online forms of communication, I show that there is a need to probe the more private avenues, in addition to the public arena. I introduce the concept of a 'two-level online sphere' in relation to this. The thesis contributes to theory building by constructing frameworks based on four dimensions of 'scaled down' political communication dynamics: 1) offline network density, 2) online network density, 3) mobile multifunctionality, and 4) flexible autonomy. In addition, I show that the Icelandic case can be seen as a 'canary in the coalmine' in relation to political communication developments in the larger democracies of the world.

Table of contents

List of tables

List of figures

CHAPTER 1:
Introduction

In Iceland, people often point out that Icelanders are 'world champions' in many and varied things. Champions, that is, with a very crucial caveat: *per capita*. Iceland, for example, produces the most electricity in the world, per capita. It is claimed that Iceland also produces the most music bands in the world, per capita. The highest number of published books in the world, per capita, can be found in Iceland. The same goes for the number of published authors and number of books read annually. Icelanders, furthermore, can claim the title of being the heaviest Coca-Cola drinkers in the world, per capita. Iceland has the most internet users in the world, per capita. Iceland also has the highest number, per capita, of golf courses in the world. The per capita list goes on and on in relation to random facts and figures. There is even a catch phrase in Icelandic often associated with this: 'Ísland, best í heimi' or, 'Iceland, best in the world' (Bjornsdottir 2016; Eliason 2014).

A couple of underlying factors help explain this per capita phenomenon. First, Iceland is a very small state in terms of population size, with only around 360,000 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland 2019). Second, it is a wealthy society and highly 'developed' from a comparative perspective (per capita, of course). It is among the richest countries in the world (Gregson 2017), and is technologically advanced, as seen, for example, in its lead in the ICT Development Index 2017, and the 100% internet penetration in the country (International Telecommunication Union 2017; Internet World Stats 2017). Iceland has ranked in first place for ten years in a row on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, meaning that it has the lowest gender gap in the world (World Economic Forum 2018a). It is in second place on the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index (Economist 2018), second place on the World Economic Forum's Inclusive Development Index (World Economic Forum 2018b), and Iceland is the most highly unionised OECD country. The wage-bargaining system in Iceland has contributed to high living standards, low inequality, and an inclusive society (OECD 2017). Literacy, longevity, and social cohesion are first rate by world standards in Iceland (The World Factbook 2019a).

Whilst now considered one of the richest countries in the world, Iceland was in a somewhat different position just over a decade ago. It was thrust into the global spotlight in the autumn of 2008, when the collapse of all of the major banks in the country caused economic, political and social turmoil, and spurred massive protests, which eventually led to the collapse of the government. Although the economy has recovered remarkably well in a few years, there is still considerable political instability. Since the crisis, this can be seen in increased political fragmentation and the electoral success of new political parties such as the Pirate Party. More recently, it has manifested in large protests and early elections following the Panama Papers scandal in 2016, and early elections again after protests in the autumn of 2017 (Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2018).

The financial crisis in Iceland and its aftermath have received substantial academic attention, for example from political scientists, sociologists, economists and historians. Crisis-related research has included the examination of voting behaviour in Iceland, the 'pots and pans' protests in Reykjavík, the causes of the collapse of the banking system, the roles politicians and institutions played in the crisis, and emotional distress amongst the public (Indriðason et al. 2017; Bernburg 2016; Johnsen 2014; Ragnarsdóttir et al. 2013; Jónsson 2009; Jóhannesson 2009). Despite the wealth of 'crisis research' emerging, there has been a noticeable lack of attention paid to the relationship between media and politics in Iceland. This is striking, given how prominently political communication scholars have emphasised the need to understand how the global financial crisis and its aftermath have impacted the association between media and politics, and what this can mean for the functioning of democracies today (e.g. Davis 2019).

The lack of post-crisis political communication research in Iceland is not surprising, since the relationship between media and politics is, in general, an under-researched field of study in the country. Existing work has mainly focused on structural overviews and analysis of certain aspects of the media and political systems, mapping media ownership, and conducting content analysis and quantitative surveys that investigate attitudes towards particular media outlets

and political parties, mainly during election campaigns.[1] This limited and fragmented work does not engage with several lines of inquiry that have featured prominently in political communication scholarship in recent years and decades. This thesis aims to contribute to filling this research void by focusing on three of these under-studied and interlinked areas of research. What they have in common is that they jointly help us to better understand *the dissemination of political information in the public sphere in Iceland and what this can mean for the functioning of democracy in the country*.

First, there exists a glaring research gap concerning how Icelanders perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media. In other words, what does the media cover, and how does it cover it? What do people learn through this coverage? Second, the relationship between journalists, politicians and the public, and how this is seen to impact political coverage, has yet to be studied in Iceland. And, third, the role social networking sites play in these interactions between politicians, journalists and the public, as well as in the political coverage in the legacy media, is under-researched.

As illustrated in subsequent chapters, the financial crisis and its aftermath have significantly impacted the dissemination of political information in Iceland. This, along with the 'small and highly developed country' aspect, is a fundamental contextual framework that helps explain elements concerning the breakdown of the legacy media, the changing relationship between politicians, journalists and the public, and the rise of social networking sites as platforms for political dissemination in a country with 100% internet penetration. In a rapidly changing media environment, it is important to understand how citizens in representative democracies like Iceland stay informed about politics, since the public needs relevant and up-to-date information to express their views and identify their interests (Aalberg & Curran 2012a).

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[1] Moreover, journalism, and media and communication research more generally, is lacking in Iceland. The relevant existing work is outlined in chapter 2.

In filling these interlinked research gaps, the Icelandic case is used to revisit and re-energise established political communication debates concerning journalist-politician relations and legacy media news coverage, as well as engaging with more recent debates focusing on online political communication. This offers new insights and opens up further avenues for research. A normative reference point serves as an overall conceptual framework in the analysis: *the ideal democratic roles of the media*. This focuses on the media serving three main purposes: acting as a watchdog; facilitating a public sphere for information and debate; and representing the people to authority (Curran 2002). To what extent is the legacy media able to fulfil these roles in Iceland? And how does the digital political communication ecology impact the media's democratic roles in the country? What about the interactions between politicians, journalists and the public?

Since political communication research on Iceland is lacking, it should not come as a surprise that it is mostly absent from the comparative political communication literature. When Iceland is mentioned, it is often simply grouped together with the other four much larger Nordic countries and defined as some sort of 'Nordic model'. One of the key differences between Iceland and the other Nordic states concerns population size. As mentioned, there are roughly 360,000 inhabitants in Iceland, whilst Norway, the second least populated Nordic state, has over 5 million inhabitants, or around 15 times the population of Iceland (The World Factbook 2019b). In their seminal comparative study on media and politics, *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics,* Hallin and Mancini (2004) ignored size as a possible factor when constructing their influential models. In addition, they excluded Iceland and other 'very small countries' from their study. In this thesis, I argue that size does in fact matter and is an important variable when understanding political communication dynamics in a small state like Iceland, as well as in the larger states.

It is not just Iceland that is missing from much of the comparative political communication literature. As chapter 2 illustrates, small states in general are mostly absent in mainstream political communication scholarship, and their

exclusion is usually not acknowledged in any way.[2] This is also the case in the much larger field of comparative political science, where academics have routinely overlooked the world's smallest states. This has, for example, led to democratisation theories being established solely on the basis of data from larger countries. This is problematic. As Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) show in their recent comparative study of democracy in 39 small states, everyday politics in small states differ significantly from what would be expected based on mainstream theoretical assumptions in political science. Formal institutions are routinely sidestepped in small states, and informal networks, multiple role relationships, and personalism disrupt preconceived ideas about how democracy actually functions. The authors argue that, if democracy really is at the crossroads, as many claim, then we need to better understand its persistence in a range of settings, not just a few large and rich states.

Similarly, Randma-Liiv and Sarapuu (2019) illustrate that most of the research in the fields of public administration and governance has been done on large states and organisations. This is, therefore, where most of the generalised knowledge comes from. It has been shown that many of the governance problems of small states are directly related to attempts to uncritically copy administrative structures, institutions, solutions and value systems from larger countries. The universalistic model that has formed the basis of modern government does not necessarily work in a small state setting, since relationships there often tend to be more particularistic. To put it more simply, small countries cannot simply be seen as smaller versions of the large countries that have been front and centre in knowledge production. When it comes to the size variable, the differences between large and small states are not solely quantitative. They are, importantly, also qualitative.

This leads to the second aim of the thesis. It fills the three research gaps previously laid out, but I argue that the findings do not just tell us something new about political communication in Iceland. They also disrupt certain foundations

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[2] The question of how to define a 'small state' is discussed in chapter 2.

and break apart theoretical and empirical assumptions in the wider literature that have mostly been based on analysis from large and medium sized western democracies. This subsequently opens up new areas of investigation focusing on smaller states that can enrich the research agenda of the discipline.

My research illustrates that whilst various similarities do emerge in comparison to the existing literature, certain assumptions that are central to these research fields are limited when examined in the small state of Iceland. The frameworks that have been constructed, based on research from larger states, cannot all be easily made to 'fit'. I illustrate how this cannot simply be explained by Icelandic idiosyncrasies. This is because my research builds on existing work that has been carried out on small states in relation to the size variable. This work on small states has not, however, examined the relationship between media and politics specifically, until now.

This, then, leads to several important questions that are dealt with in more detail later in the thesis. How might it be necessary to rethink key debates within the political communication discipline if their foundations were constructed differently and the starting assumption would be that states under investigation are smaller ones like Iceland? To what extent do we need to *expand* the current research agenda to examine the dynamics of political communication in a society like this? What different types of frameworks are needed for this type of analysis? And, perhaps most importantly, addressing the core status of knowledge in political communication scholarship: What can a study of a small state like Iceland tell us that studies of larger states cannot?

Since the Icelandic case is under-studied in the previously mentioned lines of inquiry, I decided that it would be helpful in this study to investigate the three connected research gaps together, rather than focusing on just one of them with more in-depth and narrow case studies. The thesis therefore aims to give a somewhat comprehensive overview as opposed to producing yet another fragmented piece of work in an under-researched country. This contributes to laying foundations for future research by setting out quantitative and qualitative

parameters and reference points, as well as producing original research in several important areas that have not been studied before in Iceland. I hope that this will be a fruitful starting point for further enquiries.

One of the key differences between studying a small state and a larger state in a thesis like this is that, in a smaller setting, it is possible to gain access to most, if not all, individuals and networks that are under investigation. This enables a much wider and encompassing study than would be possible for researchers investigating larger states. The thesis looks specifically at three different groups: politicians, journalists and the public. It is common for studies focusing on the relationship between journalists and politicians to rely on interview material from a relatively small sample of the journalist and political populations in the country of study, since these studies are usually conducted in large or medium sized states (e.g. Davis 2009). Alternatively, media and political elite views are examined through quantitative surveys (e.g. Van Aelst & Aalberg 2011). Public perceptions are rarely examined alongside interviews with both journalists and politicians in the same study, as is done here.

The research conducted in the thesis is defined as 'mixed methods', since I chose to use both quantitative and qualitative methods, as outlined in chapter 4. The reason for choosing a mixed methods approach can be linked to the two different types of groups studied here, journalists and politicians on the one hand, and the public on the other hand. Quantitative methods can be better suited for examining the public because they offer the possibility of using a representative sample to give insights into the views of the entire population of the country being studied. Qualitative research is unable to do this, but was seen as a good fit in this study to examine the journalists and politicians.

Since the journalists and politicians are, as a whole, a much smaller group in Iceland than in larger states, it should be possible to qualitatively interview a proportionally large sample of the overall population. In practice, this proved feasible since access to politicians and journalists was not a problem. The interviews enabled a wider ranging and more in-depth qualitative analysis of

both groups than would have been possible in a larger state because of size and access. As I argue in the thesis, boundaries between elites and the public are much more blurred in Iceland than in larger states, and the use of these two types of research methods offers differing and complementary insights into the dynamics of political communication in Iceland as a whole.

The data was collected in Iceland between two elections, from November 2016 to September 2017, with a focus on routine political coverage (not linked to a specific event, like a general election or a referendum). I considered this a useful starting point, as it helps to lay foundations and create a baseline for more narrowly focused research in the future. The thesis contributes to the literature not engaged in these big event types of analysis. Despite the media's importance in the more mundane periods, as well the more atypical moments, there is less empirical research available on news that examines routine times when no key event or incident of major significance takes place (Cushion 2012, p. 63).

For the qualitative part of the study, I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with Icelandic politicians and 25 semi-structured interviews with Icelandic journalists who cover politics. The sample for politicians consisted of 25 of the 63 sitting MPs, from all the 7 political parties represented in the Icelandic parliament (Alþingi) at the time. This included 5 of the 11 government ministers. An even larger proportion of the politicians could have been interviewed, but data saturation was taken into account after this sample had been interviewed. There are not many journalists in Iceland who write solely about politics. The criteria for inclusion in the sample for the journalist group was that the interviewees were employed as journalists and/or editors and covered political issues to some extent at one of the Icelandic media outlets. A large proportion of those who qualified ended up being interviewed.[3]

For the quantitative part of the study, a survey was sent out in May 2017, to a sample of 2000 individuals. This random sample is representative of the Icelandic

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[3] As discussed in chapter 4, I am a former journalist, and this is linked to my interest in the topic and raises several issues.

population. The survey was sent through an online system administered by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland. A total of 1264 people answered the survey, with a response rate of 63%. The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, which were based on the relevant academic literature and international surveys, as well as answers from the interviews.

My study is explorative and guided by five broad research questions, which were constructed in relation to the three research gaps on Iceland previously laid out. They are discussed in more detail in the thesis following the examination of the existing debates they intervene in. The questions are as follows:

Research gap: Routine political coverage in the legacy media
1) How do journalists and politicians in Iceland perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy news media and how is this seen to affect their working practices? (Qualitative)
2) How does the public perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy news media? (Quantitative)

Research gap: The relationship between politicians and journalists (and the public)
3) What is the nature of the relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland? (Qualitative)
4) What is the nature of the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland? (Qualitative and quantitative)

Research gap: The impact of social networking sites on political coverage and the interactions between politicians, journalist and the public
5) How are social networking sites perceived to have impacted routine political coverage and interactions between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland? (Qualitative and quantitative)

To sum up, the aim of the thesis is first to fill three research gaps on Iceland concerning perceptions of routine political news coverage, the politician-journalist relationship (and their interactions with the public), and the role social

networking sites have had on politician-journalist-public interactions, as well as on the routine political coverage in the legacy media. These three areas of study are interlinked and help us to better understand the dissemination of political information in the public sphere in Iceland, and what this can mean for the functioning of democracy in the country.

The findings from Iceland open up new areas of investigation in established political communication debates related to these gaps and show how different parameters and foundations can contribute to existing knowledge. This is linked to the second aim of the thesis. The Icelandic case is used to demonstrate how the routine exclusion of small states in political communication scholarship presents us now with an opportunity to expand the discipline. The thesis illustrates how certain qualitative differences between small and large states mean that studies of small states can open up new areas of investigation in political communication. Following on from this, the thesis concludes by discussing how the findings from Iceland might not solely tell us something about Iceland and other small states. They also help us to unravel 'canary in the coalmine' dimensions in relation to political communication developments in larger western democracies in the world today.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis is split into three parts, with a total of 9 chapters. The first part (chapters 1-4) introduces the topic, situates Iceland within the comparative political communication literature, engages with the relevant theoretical debates, and illustrates the original interventions within each of these debates. Finally, it discusses the methods and data collection. The second part (chapters 5-7) examines the empirical findings based on the three research gaps. Each chapter focuses on one of the gaps. The findings are discussed in relation to the Icelandic case, and also to wider debates in political communication. The third part (chapters 8 and 9) summarises the findings. Chapter 8 focuses specifically on analysing relevant findings in relation to the small state literature and constructs exploratory frameworks for future political communication research on small states. Chapter 9 then summarises the key findings on Iceland, illustrates what

they can potentially teach us about larger states, and ends by discussing future avenues for research. Individual chapters will now be briefly introduced.

Chapter 2 serves as a contextual framework for the subsequent analysis. It introduces the Icelandic media and political systems and the relevant existing research on Iceland. In addition, it illustrates how it proves problematic to situate Iceland within established comparative political communication frameworks, and how Iceland differs from the other Nordic countries. Moreover, the chapter shows how small states have routinely been ignored in political communication research, and it brings a new type of definition of small states to political communication research. The chapter also highlights how Iceland was particularly badly hit during the financial crisis and its aftermath. This has had lasting effects on the media and political landscapes, as will be a dominant theme throughout the thesis.

Chapter 3 critically evaluates the relevant literature on the ideal democratic roles of the media, the breakdown of the legacy media, journalist-politician relations, and the democratic potential of the internet. It discusses how legacy news coverage is increasingly seen to be failing, and how this is linked to the breakdown of funding models and increased commercialisation. It is shown that this can have more drastic ramifications in a commercialised small state like Iceland compared to larger states. The chapter subsequently shows how much of the existing politician-journalist research has examined the relationship within closed off private spheres and mostly excluded the public. This is a problematic way to approach the study of politician-journalist relations in a small state setting where boundaries are blurred between elites and the public. Politicians and journalists do not interact as much within private sphere networks in Iceland as they do in the larger states. Complicated multiple role interconnections, as well as interactions with the public, define their association, which opens up new ways of examining the relationship.

Finally, in addition, chapter 3 shows that much of early literature on the internet emphasised a techno-optimist narrative where the internet was seen as a new

type of bottom-up digital public sphere that could reinvigorate political debates. This view has been seen as problematic since it fails to take into account that the internet needs to be examined in relation to the pre-existing structures in which it operates. This has drawn attention to structural inequalities that exist in the larger states under examination. This literature has, however, missed a particular type of case, which opens up new areas of investigation. What happens if we examine the democratic potential of the internet in a society which is highly educated, very small, politically engaged, equal, and developed (from a comparative perspective), and where access to the internet is virtually 100%?

Chapter 4 discusses the data collection and describes how the different methods are complementary when answering the research questions. It highlights how the qualitative and quantitative questions were constructed using a hybrid version of the convergent parallel design and an explanatory sequential design. Furthermore, it discusses how the qualitative data was coded using open coding techniques, as well as axial coding and the descriptive and inferential quantitative data methods used. It also evaluates the methods, limitations and potential biases.

Chapter 5 engages with the first research gap and illustrates perceptions concerning the breakdown of the legacy media in Iceland and how this has impacted political coverage. The dominant perception is that the Icelandic media is not adequately fulfilling its democratic roles in informing people about important political issues and holding those in power to account. Too much emphasis is placed on sound bite coverage that is lacking in analysis, depth, and informed criticism. It is argued that this does not simply have an impact on political coverage in the media but moreover on politicians' behaviour and politics itself. The conclusions presented in this chapter echo findings from other countries that illustrate how political coverage is becoming increasingly commercialised, superficial and mediatized. The Icelandic case, however, is perceived to be even more exaggerated in this regard. Moreover, it is shown that the focus on the legacy media as a central mediator has certain limitations in relation to the Icelandic case.

Chapter 6 deals with the second research gap. It explores limitations in previous research that has focused on how politicians and journalists interact within private sphere networks and how this can serve as a key part in the social construction of politics. The chapter illustrates that Icelandic politicians and journalists are, on the one hand, closely connected in a complex web where boundaries between the public and the private are often blurred and connections can be multi-layered and deep. In this sense, there is much social closeness between politicians and journalists, and this can complicate their relationship and political coverage in the media. On the other hand, the chapter illustrates that, somewhat paradoxically, the smallness of the society means that there is, in fact, less interaction and more professional distance between the two groups in their daily working practices and routines than previous research from larger states has shown. This is linked to increasingly exaggerated small state working conditions, including shortage of resources following the financial crisis, and a lack of specialisation. The smallness of the society, moreover, means that there is much more direct interaction between journalists, politicians and the public, and this can have an effect on who sets the agenda.

Chapter 7, examining the third research gap, focuses on how social networking sites have impacted political coverage and interactions between politicians, journalists and the public. The Icelandic case illustrates that, to a certain extent, social networking sites (mainly Facebook) have facilitated democratic discussions where politicians, journalists and the public interact with each other. At the same time, even though Iceland could be considered an ideal case for democratic discussion to thrive online, it is still the case that most people do not participate in these discussions. An ideal setting for digital interaction like Iceland does not result in much *public* participation. There is, however, much interaction taking place informally behind closed digital doors on Facebook Messenger. I propose that this can be understood by examining the online interactions in terms of a 'two-level online sphere'. The chapter asks: What might the Icelandic case tell us about the internet's potential for being a public sphere for democratic debates?

Chapter 8 synthesises relevant findings from the previous chapters as they relate to the small state literature specifically. The Icelandic case breaks apart particular foundations and frameworks, and the aim of this chapter is to find a new way forward in relation to these conclusions. This is done with the construction of explorative small state political communication frameworks. I argue that they are not simply based on Icelandic idiosyncrasies, since relevant findings from small state sociology, public administration, and democratisation are used to back up conclusions as they relate to media and politics specifically. The frameworks highlight *four dimensions of 'scaled down' political communication dynamics:* 1) offline network density, 2) online network density, 3) mobile multifunctionality, and 4) flexible autonomy.

The conclusion in chapter 9 begins by showing how the five research questions have been answered in relation to the Icelandic case. Subsequently, it illustrates how the findings indicate that not only can Iceland be used as an instrumental case study for small states (as is done in chapter 8), but that several of the key findings from the Icelandic case can potentially tell us some important things about the crisis of political communication in larger states more generally. Iceland can be viewed as a canary in the coalmine in that it has already been experiencing phenomena that the larger states are now increasingly starting to face. In this sense, it will be discussed how the larger states are becoming increasingly similar to the small state of Iceland. What does this tell us about political communication scholarship and its lack of focus on smaller states? This question leads back to another: What can a study of a small state like Iceland tell us that studies of larger states cannot?

CHAPTER 2:
Setting the stage for interventions –
The Icelandic case from a comparative small state perspective

This chapter introduces the Icelandic case and illustrates how it proves challenging to situate it within existing comparative political communication frameworks. Political communication research on Iceland is lacking, and the country is usually absent from comparative studies focused on media and politics. Despite this, it is often mentioned alongside the other four much larger Nordic countries and defined as some sort of 'Nordic model'. Iceland is, in fact, dissimilar from the other four countries in several fundamental ways. In particular, two key areas of difference set the stage for interventions into established academic debates laid out in subsequent chapters.

First, Iceland is much smaller in terms of population size when compared to the other Nordic countries. There are around 360,000 people living in Iceland (Statistics Iceland 2019), whilst Norway, the second least populated Nordic country, has over 5 million inhabitants. Sweden, the most populated Nordic country, has over 10 million inhabitants, or roughly 30 times the population of Iceland (The World Factbook 2019c). Size has up until now mostly been ignored as a possible factor in understanding political communication dynamics on the national level. Moreover, the smallest states in the world have routinely been excluded from analysis. This is problematic. I argue that size does in fact matter and is an important variable when understanding political communication, both in a small state like Iceland and in the larger states.

Second, Iceland shares many institutions and traditions with the other Nordic countries, yet its political system and sociopolitical history is significantly different. This is important for understanding the development of its media system. Right-wing ideology and neoliberalism have, to an extent, been more influential in Icelandic politics and policy-making than in the other Nordic countries (Jónsson 2014). As is well established now, Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland were grouped closely together as prime examples of the democratic corporatist model in Hallin and Mancini's groundbreaking work on media

systems (2004). Their study excluded Iceland and, therefore, missed key differences between it and the other four Nordic countries. The neoliberal influence in Iceland as it relates to the media system has resulted in a heavily commercialised media system operating in a tiny market. How has this influenced political communication in the country?

The chapter is in three main sections. The first section critically evaluates the relevant literature on comparative political communication and media systems and reveals that there is a glaring gap in this literature concerning small states. As will be shown subsequently in the thesis, this has wider implications for the foundations that underpin much of this research. Small states have not completely been ignored, but, when they have been discussed, the focus has mostly been on macro-level structural aspects in relation to problematic definitions.

The second section deals with the issue of how to define small states from a political communication perspective. It introduces the literature from 'small state studies' and shows how the dominant relational definitions originating in the international relations literature and economics are ill suited for research in political communication. A new type of definition of small states is subsequently brought into the debate. It focuses not solely on macro-level structures but also on *socio-cultural* aspects that are conceptualised in relation to the 'continuum of size' and a particular type of small state social ecology.

The third section of the chapter introduces relevant aspects of the media and political landscape in Iceland. This is related to the financial crisis and its aftermath. Iceland was particularly badly hit by the crisis, and the ensuing political and economic turmoil has received substantial academic attention, including from political scientists, economists, sociologists and historians. Less attention has, however, been paid to investigating the impact on the news media, even though the crisis affected the media in important ways. Finally, Iceland's media system is compared to the other Nordic countries. In relation to this, the

limitations of previous research and gaps in knowledge with regard to Iceland and political communication are highlighted.

2.1. Comparative political communication, small states and definitions

This section discusses why comparative political communication research is seen as important. It illustrates influential arguments put forth by Hallin and Mancini and the idea behind the 'most similar systems design'. Subsequently, it shows that small states like Iceland are absent from much of the comparative work, and that recent attempts to add small states to the research agenda have their limitations. I argue that there is a need to look elsewhere for ways to study qualitative differences between small and large states.

The importance of comparative research
News exposure and the flow of political information varies significantly between countries and there are substantial cross-national differences in how informed populations are (e.g. Shehata & Strömbäck 2011; Aalberg et al. 2010; Curran et al. 2009; Iyengar et al. 2009; Dimock & Popkin 1997). Since this is the case, many have argued that research within the political communication field cannot simply be limited to examining particularities that concern single countries. Instead, it is important to discover 'transnational trends, similarities, and deviations from general patterns that only become apparent when a broad – comparative – perspective is taken' (Pfetsch & Esser 2004, p. 6).

The lack of a comparative perspective can give rise to misleading generalisations. As Blumler and Gurevitch (1995) argue, comparative research is an essential antidote to 'naïve universalism', the tendency to presume that political communication research from one society (usually one's own) are applicable everywhere. As they point out, 'although many theoretical propositions about the social and political functions of the mass media are couched in universal terms, the evidence adduced in support of them is almost always culturally specific' (p. 75). The need for more comparative political communication research is frequently linked to arguments concerning the importance of examining how

informed citizens are in different societies and the media's role in informing them. It is commonly argued that those who are informed are more likely to participate in politics, have meaningful opinions on issues, and be able to link their interests with their attitudes and furthermore to choose political representatives that are in line with their own convictions. And, 'in order to express political views and identify their self-interests, citizens need relevant and up-to-date information about current affairs' (Aalberg & Curran 2012a, p. 3).

A key turning point for comparative political communication research was the publication of Hallin and Mancini's influential book *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics* (2004). As is often noted, the book has become a key reference point for studies of journalism and political communication (e.g. Brüggemann et al. 2014). In it, the authors use what is called the 'most similar systems design', where the focus is on relatively comparable cases, which means that the number of relevant variables will be reduced. This ultimately limits the number of cases but as they state, 'in a field such as communication, where the existing literature and available data are limited, this is often a benefit as well in the sense that it is impossible for analysts to handle competently more than a limited number of cases' (p. 6). Much of this discussion is aimed at the earlier work *Four Theories of the Press* (Siebert et al. 1956), which Hallin and Mancini felt was far too broad and, as a result, superficial and did not tell us much about the media systems included in the study.

Using their most similar systems design, Hallin and Mancini constructed three different types of models for comparing media systems: the liberal model, the polarised pluralist model, and the democratic corporatist model.[4] As they point out, these models are ideal types. The media systems of the countries they studied only fit them to a certain extent and there is considerable variation between the countries that they group together. Succinctly put, the liberal model is

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[4] The models are based on four dimensions that the authors argue are useful in comparing media systems in Western Europe and North America. In simple terms, they are: 1) the development of media markets, with particular emphasis on the development of a mass circulating press, 2) political parallelism, that is the degree and nature of the links between the media and political parties, 3) the development of journalistic professionalism, and 4) the degree and nature of state intervention in the media system (Hallin & Mancini 2004, p. 21).

characterised by 'a relative dominance of market mechanisms and of commercial media', and it persists in its purest form in the United States. The polarised pluralist model is characterised by the 'integration of the media into party politics, weaker historical development of commercial media, and a strong role of the state' and is to be found primarily in Southern Europe. Finally, the democratic corporatist model can be said to be a blend of the other two, with its 'historical coexistence of commercial media, and media tied to organized and political groups, and by a relatively active but legally limited role of the state' (Hallin & Mancini 2004, p. 11). The democratic corporatist model is to be found in Northern Europe, and the Nordic countries are shown to be the clearest example of this model.

As Hallin and Mancini state, their most similar design study encompasses the United States, Canada, and Western Europe, 'excluding only very small countries' (p. 6). Their only mention of a 'very small country' in relation to this exclusion is Luxembourg, and they seem to use it as an example to illustrate why it is *not* problematic to omit it from their study. This is due to the fact that much of its media system is directed toward audiences in its neighbouring countries. Apart from this, they do not attempt to explain why they have excluded the smaller countries in Europe. For example, they include four of the five Nordic countries but do not discuss why they ignore Iceland.

Comparative work produced after the publication of Hallin and Mancini's book often cites their research and the three models but does not necessarily engage with this work in much depth (e.g. Esser et al. 2012; Van Aelst et al. 2008). The simple classification system seems to be appealing for comparative research. However, as Hardy (2012) points out, one of the main critiques aimed at Hallin and Mancini specifically emphasises that the country classifications are in fact too simplistic and, despite the caveats carefully presented by the authors, there is 'continuing critical debate concerning the features of the models as well as the identification of countries within them' (p. 192). Comparative empirical studies have shown that the models do not necessarily fit when using cases that were included in Hallin and Mancini's study. For example, in their study on political

journalism in four countries, Albæk et al. (2014) found that, even though the country selections nicely dovetail with the Hallin and Mancini typology, the 'data do not systematically *fit* their model' (p. 51).[5] Similarly, in their six-nation study on how the media inform democracy, Aalberg and Curran (2012b) conclude that even though 'Hallin and Mancini provide an elegant theoretical model, we have not found empirical proof that their classification system explains cross-national differences' (p. 193).[6]

Hallin and Mancini have not only been criticised for the models being too simplistic as they relate to the countries that were included in the study. Many also argue that the exclusion of certain countries and parts of the world means that more variables need to be added, such as religion and media freedom (Brüggemann et al. 2014). In a follow-up edited book, *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, Hallin and Mancini (2012) emphasise that they never intended the models to be used to classify any and all media systems. They discuss the criticism they received by focusing solely on western systems and the book subsequently extends their previous work by including cases outside of Western Europe and North America, including Poland, Brazil and China.[7]

Hallin and Mancini ignored 'very small countries' in their first book and it is noteworthy that the follow-up also excludes the smaller states of the world. This is not necessarily surprising. It quickly becomes apparent when examining comparative political communication work more generally, whether in book length studies or journal articles, that the small states[8] of the world are routinely overlooked, as is the question of size as a variable in the relationship between media and politics on the national level (e.g. Albæk et al. 2014; Van Dalen & Van Aelst 2014; Esser et al. 2012; Aalberg et al. 2010; Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010; Van Aelst et al. 2008). What does this tell us? Do the smaller states of the world

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[5] The countries compared were the United Kingdom, Denmark, Spain and Germany.
[6] The countries studied were the United States, the United Kingdom, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.
[7] Other authors, prior to, and after the publication of Hallin and Mancini's first book, have also argued for a need to expand the scope outside of the western world and to include a more global focus (e.g. Dobek-Ostrowska et al. 2010; Curran & Park 2000).
[8] The question of how to define a small state will be discussed in the subsequent section.

not matter in this type of research? Are the small states similar to the larger states, or do we miss a key part of the puzzle by failing to examine them? Researchers will not necessarily recognise the importance of the size variable if the cases examined do not include the world's smallest states. This is because the clearest difference in the impact of the size variable should, logically, be between the largest and smallest states.

Media systems and small states

Although Hallin and Mancini fail to examine size as a possible variable in comparative media systems work, it is important to emphasise that a discussion concerning small states and size in this area of work has not been completely ignored. In an attempt to add small states to the comparative media systems debate, a 2009 issue of *The International Communication Gazette* was devoted entirely to media systems in small states. In his introduction to the edited collection, Puppis (2009) points out that small states have mostly been absent from the recent media systems research agenda and mentions, for example, that Hallin and Mancini's typology neglects the size of media systems. He claims that the small state perspective is important for the analysis of media systems since small states share structural peculiarities that have implications for their media landscapes.

Puppis illustrates some of the problems with defining small states (like many authors do when discussing small states (Sarapuu 2010)) but ends with a wide focus on population. He argues that it is possible to distinguish between small states and 'microstates' with a few thousand inhabitants, such as Andorra and Liechtenstein, but that it is more difficult to decide on the upper limit. Following this, Puppis states: 'For Europe, usually all countries aside from France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain and the UK are considered small states.' He subsequently goes on to define small states as 'countries with a minimum of 100,000 and a maximum of 18 million inhabitants. This range allows for the inclusion of the Netherlands – admittedly a giant among the small ones' (Puppis 2009, p. 8).

The special issue includes discussions on Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria and Portugal. These states are often classified as small states in the international relations literature (as will be explained in more detail in the following section) but noticeably absent are states with less than 1 million inhabitants like Iceland, Luxembourg and Malta. Puppis's attempt to bring the small states perspective to the comparative media systems field is an important development since he emphasises how various research agendas have been blind when it comes to the size of states. I argue, however, that his definition is problematic. It is always arbitrary where one places the population limits, but what the subsequent discussion on the social ecology of small states illustrates is that the smaller states differ somewhat from the 'small states' with larger populations, like Sweden and Belgium. A noticeable research gap still exists in the comparative political communication literature when many states classified as small (according to Puppis's definition) were, in fact, originally included in Hallin and Mancini's work, but smaller states excluded from Hallin and Mancini's work are *also* excluded from the special issue of *The International Communication Gazette* focusing specifically on media systems in small states, as well as from most comparative research in political communication.[9]

Puppis (2009) argues that the economic realities of small states are of importance and have implications for their media system. Here he is specifically referring to the smallness of the domestic markets and, as a result of his previously introduced definition, is grouping together tiny markets (with well under a million inhabitants) and those countries that have several million inhabitants. Puppis claims that small media systems share four structural peculiarities. First, with regard to *shortage of resources,* it is clear that small states face various limitations on the production side. Shortage of resources occurs with regard to

[9] To name one specific example with regard to Iceland, the editors of a book on comparative political communication in the Nordic countries invited authors to submit chapters on case studies in the five countries. Not a single submission focused on Iceland (Strömbäck et al. 2008). One chapter on media and politics in Iceland was commissioned which is mainly an historical overview of the political and media systems (Hardarson 2008), as will be illustrated subsequently. The lack of focus on small states more generally can be seen in the work cited previously in this section, as well as in most comparative books and journal articles in the field. Some case studies focused on media systems and journalism have been carried out in small states (e.g. Sammut 2009).

capital but also know-how, creativity and professionals in the media. Second, *small audience markets and small advertising markets* means that, even though the production costs can be the same, the audience market is very small and there are limits to advertising revenue. Third, Puppis argues that *dependence* is an important factor. Small media systems are strongly affected by developments such as globalisation and commercialisation but are less able than the larger states to influence this. And finally, small media systems are particularly *vulnerable* when it comes to foreign takeovers (pp. 10-11).

There are some fundamental differences with regard to these peculiarities when one compares, for example, the Icelandic system with roughly 360,000 inhabitants and the much larger 'small states'. These differences are not addressed in the existing work on media systems. I argue that the question of resource constraints needs to be *expanded* from being mainly used to explain the *structural* peculiarities of the system. Resource constraints influence not only these structural aspects, but also *socio-cultural* factors in small states, as examined in the following section. This opens up new areas of investigation and expands the political communication research agenda. Uncovering these socio-cultural aspects requires a different type of definition than the one introduced by Puppis.

If the definition of '100,000 – 18 million inhabitants' is seen as problematic here, then what is a more useful definition? How are small states usually defined outside of the media systems debate? Exploring the literature in comparative politics, where much effort is put into researching and defining different types of states, leaves one without clear answers. Even though the comparative approach is much more established in political science than in political communication (De Vreese 2012), the smallest countries are likewise largely excluded from the vast amount of comparative research. As Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) emphasise, although there are significant differences in the threshold that researchers apply in order to exclude small states, it is striking that 'almost all publications in this field do employ a cutoff point that results in their elimination' (p. 528). For example, in Samuel P. Huntington's seminal text *The Third Wave* (1991, cf.

Veenendaal & Corbett 2015), all countries with less than 1 million inhabitants were excluded. Many scholars do not even provide a substantive justification for their decision to omit small states. 'The assumption is implicit: Small states do not matter' (Veenendaal & Corbett 2015, p. 528).

Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) argue that small states do indeed matter in comparative politics and their rationale is methodological, in terms of representativeness and variation. First, if small states are similar to the larger states regarding political arrangements, then researchers are wasting valuable data by not including them in their work. As they illustrate in relation to this, there has been a clear global trend toward ever smaller states and the number of small states has risen substantially in recent years. 'As a result, to omit states with less than 500,000 inhabitants would now mean that approximately 15% of the available cases are excluded from analysis. This figure grows to more than 20% if the population threshold is raised to 1 million' (p. 529). Second, if small states differ from the larger states politically, then we are missing out on the insights that these diverse, extreme, or 'most different' cases offer.[10] The focus here highlights the latter part, concerning key differences between small and large states. In order to understand these differences, there is a need to engage with research from another academic field.

2.2. A new way of researching political communication in small states

This section introduces the literature from what is often referred to as 'small state studies'. It brings a new type of definition of small states into the debate, which focuses on the 'continuum of size'. This part of the chapter relies mainly on research from public administration, governance, and democracy as it relates to small states. Five traits of small states can be specified based on the public

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[10] Veenendaal and Corbett (2015) argue that the case study literature on politics in small states can offer valuable insights regarding democratisation. For example, Huntington's research on the third wave was heavily criticised because the expected democratic transition in many of the states he looked at did not materialise, and some even argued that a third 'reverse wave' was on the horizon. However, the inclusion of the 20 excluded small states would have problematised this so-called reversal and strengthened Huntington's case.

administration and governance literature. Recent comparative research on democracy in small states backs up key points as they relate to 'small state personalism'. As shown subsequently in the thesis, the Icelandic case uncovered similar small state themes as outlined here. The framework presented in this section has not been used in political communication research before. It is an important foundation needed in order to bring the smaller states of the world into the discipline, and to understand how they are qualitatively different when compared to the larger states.

International relations, economics and small state studies
The fact that small states are often missing in comparative political research does not mean that they have been ignored by academics studying politics. There is a growing body of research that can be assembled under the term 'small state studies', although it is still underdeveloped as a distinct field of research (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019). As Sarapuu (2010, p. 31) explains, in the small states literature one quickly realises that small is in fact 'a very relative concept. It depends on the perspective and the other side of the comparison.' There are, for example, international relations studies on 'small states' like Belgium, Austria, the Netherlands or Finland that can be characterised as small in the context of the European Union, especially before the big enlargement in 2004 (e.g. Thorhallsson 2000; Katzenstein 1985). On the other hand, there is substantial literature on small island states (also referred to as microstates), mostly in the Caribbean and the South Pacific (e.g. Corbett & Veenendaal 2018; Sutton 2006; Bray & Packer 1993). 'In this context, it is not surprising that almost every discussion on small states starts with the issue of definition' (Sarapuu 2010, p. 31).

Put simply, there are two research streams focusing on small states. First, there is the emphasis on exploring small states with regard to economics and international relations (e.g. Ingebritsen et al. 2006). This usually addresses the role of the smaller states in the global arena, as opposed to studying domestic governance issues (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019). The second research stream focuses more on the internal governance aspects, such as distinct public

administration characteristics or domestic politics in small states (e.g. Corbett & Veenendaal 2018; Randma 2001; Farrugia 1993; Baker 1992).

These two research streams rely on very different definitions. The interest of those focusing on small states in global economics and international relations is mainly on small states as 'small powers'. As Sarapuu (2010, pp. 31–32) argues, the focus on small powers (in simple negation as those states that are not great powers) allows for a flexible and wide approach to the countries being studied, making 'small' dependent on other parts of the comparison or possibly even equal to 'weak'.' This sort of relative definitional approach is largely shared by economists and places the small states in the external environment since it defines small states vis-à-vis their external relations (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019).

Common factors used to determine state size in this 'external definition' literature include population, territory, gross domestic product (GDP), and military capacity. Thorhallsson and Wivel (2006) argue that being a small state is tied to a specific spatio-temporal context. In that 'a state may be weak in one relation but simultaneously powerful in another. According to this definition, small states are those states which are unable to change the basic contours of this context' (p. 654). Conversely, a great power is a state capable of changing the policy-making conditions. For example, if the United States left NATO, this would radically change the institution, but Denmark's departure would mainly be felt by Danes themselves. A small state cannot credibly threaten to leave, alter or destroy the international institutional structures.

The limits of these types of flexible relational definitions used in international relations and economics research is that they are mainly illustrating how small states compare to larger states in the international arena and do not focus on the *internal* governance aspects of small states. These definitions are therefore not particularly helpful starting points for political communication research that aims to understand what is taking place within particular small states or media

systems.[11] Importantly, I argue these definitions are also too wide and, as a result, fail to hone in on what makes the smallest states different from the larger 'small states'. Another area of research casts light on this.

As highlighted, the second research stream focuses more on the internal governance aspects of small states, such as distinct public administration characteristics in small states or their domestic politics. In this stream, one finds much more emphasis placed on finding an absolute criterion for defining 'small', as opposed to the relational definitions discussed previously. By far the most widespread criteria within this stream of research is that of the state's population (e.g. Randma-Liiv 2002). However, the population figures used differ drastically from the wide definition introduced earlier in relation to media systems in small states (Puppis's definition of 100,000 - 18 million), and in the international relations literature, where common cut-off points are 10, 15 or even 30 million inhabitants (Thorhallsson and Steinsson 2016).

Within the internal research stream, small states have most commonly been defined as those states with a population of 1 million or less (e.g. Corbett & Veenendaal 2018), but recent studies by the World Bank and the Commonwealth Secretariat have employed the boundary of 1.5 million (Sarapuu, 2010).[12] It is striking how this research stream drastically differs from the previously discussed international relations stream of research and the definition presented by Puppis (2009). For example, Norway, Finland, Denmark and Sweden are usually considered small states in the international relations and EU context, but they are too populous to be considered 'small' in the internal governance research stream. The only sovereign Nordic country that would be defined as small using the population definition within the second stream is Iceland.

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[11] Puppis (2009) reaches a similar conclusion in his discussion and argues that, even though it is necessary to consider relational and attributive features of smallness, population size is a useful indicator with respect to media systems since it directly influences the size of media markets.
[12] There are also attempts to give more objective categorisations of states by combining population with other characteristics like area and GDP (Crowards 2002).

The five small state traits and unique social ecology

I argue that a narrower definition concerning population size than found in the international relations, economics, and media systems literature is necessary in order to comprehend the uniqueness of the internal workings of very small states, including the dynamics of political communication. This argument is based on previous research on small states. As Sarapuu (2010, p. 33) sums up, small states have been shown to have special administrative characteristics and can be expected to present particular behavioural 'patterns the more one goes down the scale (size of population being the criterion).' Existing research shows that population influences the inner workings of small states mainly through two mechanisms: first, through the limited availability of resources, mostly human capital; and, second, through a particular type of social ecology. The argument is not to adopt a particular cut-off point regarding population size. Instead there is evidence for a 'continuum of size', in which these mechanisms become *more apparent the smaller the population becomes*, regardless of other traits in the state (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019; Sarapuu 2010; Bray & Packer 1993).

As Farrugia (1993) illustrates, it is important to understand that senior officials in the very small states work under drastically different conditions than their colleagues in larger states (such as the other four Nordic states commonly grouped together with Iceland), even if their titles and duties appear similar or even identical. Tiny populations mean that a small number of people are involved in the administration, possibilities for specialisation are limited, and there is a limited pool of skilled persons to perform important roles. In addition, the small social field leads to a particular kind of social ecology, which is defined by a closely knit and integrated community with highly personalised relations, and this makes 'the work of their senior officials more diffused, yet more interrelated and complex' (p. 221).[13]

In her review of existing studies of small states, Sarapuu (2010) defines five traits of small states that can be linked to the limited availability of resources and the

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[13] For research on how the size of administrations in small states impacts their behaviour in international institutions see for example Thorhallsson (2000).

particular social ecology: 1) limited scope of activity; 2) multi-functionalism; 3) reliance on informal structures; 4) constraints on steering and control; and, finally, 5) higher personalism. Sarapuu focuses on discussing the literature specifically in relation to public administration, but the small states research can be applied to other areas, as I do in the thesis in relation to political communication. The small state traits highlight various *socio-cultural* differences between the smaller and larger states. This is a key difference from the media systems literature since the focus is not mainly on *structural* peculiarities, but also on how the size variable influences relationships and how individuals operate in smaller settings.

With regard to the first small state trait, it has been shown that the burden of statehood is much higher for small states than larger ones. There are certain functions that states have to fulfil regardless of their size and there is a greater need to prioritise scant resources.[14] Comparatively speaking, small states need to mobilise more resources to deal with public problems that arise. This can influence both the scope of tasks undertaken as well as the content of policy choices (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019).

The second trait is multi-functionalism. The small size of states limits specialisation, and it is common for senior officials in small states to be responsible for several sectors, which in larger countries are catered for by separate units (Farrugia 1993). Small states tend to have more multifunctional ministries and there is often no clear-cut division between policy formation and implementation. Furthermore, 'in smaller states the bureaucrats can also be expected to be more influential policy-makers than their colleagues in the larger states. That contributes further to the blurring of lines between administering and political decision-making' (Sarapuu 2010, p. 35).

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[14] For example, Hay (2002) has shown that the limited scope of Luxembourg's foreign policy goals can be explained by the size of the state. The small size acts as a hindrance to Luxembourg's foreign-policy capabilities, and therefore only a careful selection of the most important goals is promoted.

In one of the first studies of small states, Firth (1951, cf. Randma 2001) found that there is less specialisation of roles in a small-scale society. Small states need most of the basic types of personnel required in larger states, but they are needed in smaller numbers (Randma 2001). Small organisations may not be able to hire full-time specialists, so the incentive is to focus more on multifunctional generalists. Multi-functionalism is, of course, also required in larger states, but research shows that it becomes more important as the scale of the population gets smaller (e.g. Bray 1991). In other words, the smaller the state in terms of population, the more multifunctional the roles become. Generalists are much more useful in this setting than specialists.

Linked to the limited scope of activity and multi-functionalism is the third trait, reliance on informal structures. Small state administrations tend to rely more on flexibility, and the interaction between units is often characterised by a lack of machinery for formal coordination and heavier reliance on informal means of communications (Raadschelders 1992). The small state tendency seems to be to adapt structures and jobs to people rather than to fit individuals into formal organisational frameworks. This challenges the instrumental perspective for organisation structure, which sees the norms for practice existing outside of the individuals. In smaller states, it is more difficult to apply hierarchical and routine-based structures. With regard to her research on the Estonian civil service, Randma (2001) found that, as a rule, task allocations and job descriptions are often created with specific people in mind. As a result, this high level of personalisation 'makes jobs and units very unstable which, in turn, causes great difficulties with institutionalized coordination, division of labour within the civil service, strategic planning and management' (p. 47).

The fourth trait focuses on constraints on steering and control. It emphasises that the institutionalisation of control mechanisms demands resources prescribed for that task as well as specific expert knowledge. Small states tend to be constrained in both. When many intervening management levels are missing, problematic issues will quickly reach the very top of the administration. 'Therefore, there is

an incentive built into the small systems to trust the competence of individual officials and units' (Sarapuu 2010, p. 37).

Finally, regarding the fifth trait, higher personalism, it has been shown that small states are in general characterised by a high degree of interpersonal relations. As Farrugia (1993) illustrates, states with a small number of inhabitants tend to develop closely integrated societies containing an intricate network of personal relationships. People know each other (or know someone who knows someone whose service they need), so ministers, parliamentarians, influential businessmen, journalists and others are easily reachable. As he states, 'It is not unusual in these circumstances for people who cannot obtain formal appointments to manage to get invited to social functions or family reunions where they can casually meet the minister or official concerned' (p. 222).

The personalism trait can be related to the early work on the sociology of size by Benedict (1966). He argued that in a small-scale society, individuals interact over and over again with the same people in all sorts of social situations. Whilst in a large-scale society, individuals have many impersonal relationships, as well as more personal ones. In small states, relationships can therefore be defined in terms of 'multiple roles', and there are constant blurred lines between the professional and the personal. Related to this, Lowenthal (1987) defines small state relationships in terms of 'managed intimacy', arguing that people in small states learn to get along, whether they like it or not, with people they will know over their entire lives in many different contexts. Not simply the small size of the state but moreover the complexity and durability of most relationships foster sophisticated modes of accommodation.

A recent comparative study of democracy in the world's 39 states with populations of under one million inhabitants, by Corbett and Veenendaal (2018), echoes the findings on small state personalism. Most of the states in the study have received scant scholarly attention. The authors show that the more formal indicators established in comparative political science miss key differences between politics in small and large states. It is important to probe the informal

settings in small states because formal institutions are often sidestepped in hyper-personalistic politics. The authors argue that the real story of politics in small states is personalism and 'informal dynamics' (pp. 11-12).

Many authors studying small states argue that much more research on them is needed in different areas. It quickly became apparent when conducting research on politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland that several aspects related to resource constraints and the small state social ecology are relevant when analysing journalist-politician-public relationships and the democratic roles of the media. As shown in subsequent chapters, the small state literature needs to be incorporated into my academic interventions on political communication. The small state ecology illustrates how boundaries, interactions and relationships need to be conceptualised in a different manner in Iceland than has been done when studying media and politics in larger states. This opens up new avenues for investigation and expands the discipline.

In sum, the wide relational definitions are problematic starting points in political communication research since they end up grouping together the smallest states and the 'small states' like Sweden and the Netherlands. Research has shown that when focusing on the internal aspects of small states it is more useful to adopt a 'continuum of size' approach. Studies show that the smaller the population is, the more exaggerated the resource constraints and small state ecology becomes. The emphasis here is not mainly on structural aspects (like in the media systems literature), but also on how the size variable influences individuals and relationships between people. I return to this literature in subsequent chapters where relevant, and more systematically in chapter 8, when findings from the empirical chapters are synergised into exploratory conceptual frameworks for future studies of political communication in small states. Since many of the themes uncovered can be related to previous work focused on small states in other fields, I argue that the findings are not simply based on Icelandic idiosyncrasies.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, it is not just the question of smallness that makes Iceland different from the other Nordic countries. Since Iceland is mostly missing from the political communication literature, it is important for the context of the subsequent empirical work to map out relevant characteristics of the media and political landscapes in the country. This reveals certain differences between Iceland and the other Nordic countries. These differences play a role in subsequent academic interventions, alongside the small state literature.

2.3. The missing Nordic country: Introducing Iceland

Available statistics concerning the media industry are more limited in Iceland than in many other European countries, including the four Nordic countries. This can be linked to Iceland's absence from comparative research. In addition, public authorities do not monitor the media market to the extent done in the other Nordic countries, nor has the industry itself agreed upon the gathering of common key indicators (Ohlsson & Facht 2017, p. 83). This section draws on the limited research on media, journalism and political communication in Iceland, as well as on data from other relevant sources.[15] Before this, it begins by briefly introducing the political landscape in Iceland, which is important in order to understand the development of its media system.

The political landscape in Iceland

Iceland is a parliamentary republic. It became a sovereign state in 1918 but remained in a royal union with Denmark until 1944, when it adopted its republican constitution. Alþingi, the Icelandic legislature, is a unicameral parliament. It consists of 63 members who are elected in six multimember constituencies by two-tier proportional representation (d'Hondt). Fifty-four members are elected according to constituency results, whilst the nine remaining

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[15] Parts of the data for this section (on the Icelandic media market) were collected with support from the Power and Democracy Project at the University of Iceland, in collaboration with Valgerður Jóhannsdóttir. This material was later published in an article (Jóhannsdóttir & Ólafsson 2018) in a special issue on Power and Democracy in the *Icelandic Review of Politics & Administration*.

supplementary seats are allocated on the basis of national results amongst the parties obtaining at least 5% of the national vote (Hardarson 2008).

Historically, there have been four main parties in the Icelandic party system that took shape between 1916 and 1930. The traditional four types of parties are easily recognisable when compared to similar European parties. They consist of a conservative party (the Independence Party), an agrarian/centre party (the Progressive Party), a social democratic party and a left-socialist/communist party. A restructuring has regularly taken place on the left side of the political spectrum, and the two parties to the left are now called the Social Democratic Alliance and the Left-Green Movement. In addition to these four parties, there have usually been one or, at most, two other smaller parties represented in the Icelandic parliament (Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2018; Hardarson 2008).

The financial crisis in 2008 and its aftermath shook the foundation of Icelandic politics, including the four-party system. The collapse of all major banks in Iceland caused economic and political turmoil and spurred massive protests in the country, often referred to as the 'pots and pans' revolution (Bernburg 2016). Although the economy has recovered remarkably well (e.g. Jónsson & Sigurgeirsson 2017), there is still considerable social and political instability, witnessed recently by the early elections following the Panama Papers scandal in 2016 and early elections again in the autumn of 2017.

Trust in various institutions in Iceland collapsed following the crisis. For example, in February 2008, a few months before the crisis hit, 42% of Icelanders said that they trusted the Icelandic parliament. A year later, that confidence had plummeted to only 13%. In 2012, trust in the parliament hit an all-time low of 10%. The most recent poll in 2019 found the trust to be 18% (Gallup 2019). As Bjarnason (2014) illustrates, trust in most institutions fell sharply in Iceland in comparison to other countries. As he discusses, it is common that public faith in institutions in countries that go through very difficult economic periods falls more sharply than in other countries.

The years following the financial crisis have seen a substantial change in the vote share of the four established political parties, as well as the number of parties represented in Alþingi. Until the election of 2013, the four parties in combination usually received around 85-90% of the vote in parliamentary elections. In 2013, the four received only 75%, and this shrunk even further, to 63% in 2016 and 65% in 2017. The established parties appear to have lost their dominant status following the crisis, creating a vacuum for new political parties and voices to emerge. Since the 2009 election, there have been six new political parties in the Icelandic parliament. Four of them, the Pirate Party, the People's Party, the Centre Party, and Reform, won representation in the parliament in the 2017 election. This means that there are currently eight political parties represented in Alþingi, which is a record number (Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2018).

The Icelandic Election Study (ICENES) illustrates that the proportion of partisan voters has been declining. In 1983, the proportion of respondents who said that they supported a particular party was 50.2%, but in 2016 this number had almost halved, to only 29.5% (Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2018). Although party identification in Iceland has slowly been declining, membership has remained surprisingly high; in the period from 1983 to 2003 it was 16-18% (Hardarson 2008).[16] Primaries have been extensively used in Iceland in recent decades to select candidates and from 1983 to 2007, 15-30% of all voters claimed to have taken part in a primary before each Alþingi election. Turnout in elections has been high in Iceland like in the other Nordic countries. In the latest parliamentary elections in 2017, the turnout was 81.2% (Statistics Iceland 2017a), compared to, for example, 78.2% in Norway in 2017 (Statistics Norway 2017) and 87.2% in Sweden in 2018 (Statistics Sweden 2018). This is considerably higher than, for example, the 69% turnout in the parliamentary election in the United Kingdom in 2017 (The Electoral Commission 2017).

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[16] It should be noted that Icelandic parties do not demand any activity from the members and do not strictly collect membership fees. A recent comparative figure from the United Kingdom is 1.8% (Audickas et al. 2018).

Right wing ideology and neoliberalism have, to an extent, been more influential in Icelandic politics and policy-making than in the other Nordic countries (e.g. Jónsson 2014).[17] This is not surprising considering the dominant role of the right-wing Independence Party. Iceland deviates from the Scandinavian norm of strong social democratic parties. The Independence Party has been by far the most dominant political force in the country, enjoying around 40% of the votes in the pre-crisis four-party era, and it has been the most dominant party in government; since the foundation of the republic, the party has been in government for roughly 75% of the time. It has been 'the party of officialdom and the establishment of Iceland' (Kristinsson 2012, p. 189). In the post-crisis era, the vote share of the Independence Party has shrunk substantially, with the party winning 25.2% of the vote share in the 2017 election (Statistics Iceland 2017a).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) argue that governments in the democratic corporatist countries have been predominantly consensus governments; in the liberal countries they have mainly been majoritarian; and both types in the polarised pluralist countries. Hallin and Mancini use Lijphart's model (1999, cf. Hallin & Mancini 2004) to contrast the main features of majoritarian and consensus politics. Icelandic politics match with neither. Iceland has a multiparty system and proportional representation, but power sharing, compromise and cooperation between opposing forces is not a very fitting description of Icelandic politics (Indriðason & Kristinsson 2018; Jónsson 2014; Hardarson 2008). Kristinsson (2018) argues that privileged access to state power was crucial in the patronage network of parties and politicians that characterised Icelandic politics, which in return 'encouraged political conflict and competition for power' (p. 5).

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[17] This does not mean that neoliberalism has been the driving force in general terms as regards economic or social policies. As shown, for example, in a recent study by the OECD (2017), 'Iceland has an egalitarian society with strong trade unions, very low inequality and high gender balance' (p. 16). The emphasis here is on a comparison between Iceland and the other four Nordic countries. These countries are usually high on most indicators concerning equality, welfare policies and so on. The fact that Iceland is more neoliberal than them does, therefore, not equate to it being particularly neoliberal in a worldwide comparison. The discussion here emphasises specifically how neoliberal policies have influenced the media landscape in Iceland in relation to the other four Nordic states.

Minority governments have usually not been tolerated in Iceland, unlike in the Scandinavian countries.[18]

Hallin and Mancini (2004) posit that the distinction between majority and consensus rule is connected to the political role of interest groups in society, or, in other words, the level of corporatism. Corporatism, the formal integration of social groups into the political process, is one of the important characteristics of the democratic corporatist countries according to Hallin and Mancini. It developed late in Iceland and only in limited areas of policy. Jónsson (2014) argues that this can largely be explained by the political weakness of the social democrats and the left. The media system in Iceland in the 20th century bore more resemblance to organised pluralism (typical in both the democratic corporatist countries and the polarised pluralist countries) than the individual pluralism prevalent in the liberal countries. Organised pluralism is associated with external pluralism and political parallelism in the media, and, as in the democratic corporatist countries, the Icelandic press had strong ties to political parties until the end of the 20th century. Each of the national newspapers was affiliated to one of the four main political parties (Hardarson 2008).

For most of the 20th century, Iceland was a very politicised society. The four political parties dominated most spheres of society, including foreign trade, banking, literature, housing, and jobs in the government and the media. Professional journalism was mostly absent and articles by political opponents in the party press were unheard of. The Icelandic State Radio, which was founded in the 1930s, was controlled by the Radio Council, proportionally elected by the political parties at Alþingi. The major editorial line of public radio was to avoid political coverage, except for reading formal resolutions from the conventions of the four political parties and occasionally broadcasting debates from Alþingi. 'By excluding discussion and current affairs programs from the radio, the parties had

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[18] Jónsson (2014) compares the situation in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to that of Iceland. In the three larger Nordic states, 39 of the 46 governments in the period 1970-2007 were minority governments. In Iceland, there have only been four minority governments since the foundation of the republic in 1944. Moreover, all 'have been transitory bargains between political parties until a majority government could be formed' (p. 11).

de facto monopoly of all regular political mass communication through the party press' (Hardarson 2008, pp. 69–70).

Considerable liberalisation of the economy took place in the 1960s, and the strict control of political parties over society, *partiocracy* as it was often called, was increasingly criticised. Similar changes were taking place in the Icelandic media system. In the early 1970s, a notable change took place in State Radio and Television (the latter had been founded in 1966) when critical discussion and current affairs programmes were introduced. 'Suddenly, the broadcasting media became an important arena for political communication – for the first time Icelandic politicians had to answer critical questions on radio and TV from independent and sometimes hostile journalists' (Hardarson 2008, p. 70). According to Kristinsson (2012), political clientelism in Iceland was widespread and its reach was deep. This is a characteristic Iceland shares with the polarised pluralist countries, where clientelism was strong through much of the 20th century and whose legacy Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 58) claim 'is still important to understanding the media system in that region.'

The media landscape in Iceland

The media system in Iceland transformed in the last two decades of the 20th century, and this transformation corresponded to changes in Icelandic society, including the political and economic systems. Political parallelism in the media gave way to a more market-driven media, and political parties' hold on *RÚV*, the public broadcasting service, started to lessen in the last decades of the 20th century (Hardarson 2008). The broadcast media was deregulated in 1985, the last political party newspaper ceased publication in 1997, and the first Icelandic online news publication appeared in 1998 (Friðriksson 2000). At the beginning of the 21st century, the first free daily newspaper was launched (Karlsson 2004). The Icelandic media market has, to a large extent, been dominated by three media companies, in terms of revenue and audience share as well as the number of journalists employed. These are *RÚV* and two private media companies, *365 Media*, and the publishing company *Árvakur*.

365 Media was by far the biggest private media company in Iceland, operating several TV and radio stations, newspapers and online sites, as well as magazines and telecoms. However, in March 2017, the broadcasting part of *365 Media* was sold to *Sýn* (Vodafone Iceland), which now is the only private actor in broadcasting that has its own news operation, *Channel 2* (*Stöð 2*) and radio *Bylgjan*. *Sýn* also took over *visir.is,* the second most-read online news site in the country.[19] *Sýn* is a publicly traded company, and its biggest shareholders are pension funds and insurance companies. The free paper *Fréttablaðið*, which is the most-read newspaper in Iceland, is still in the hands of *365 Media*. The principal owner is an independent investor with interests in other sectors (Fjölmiðlanefnd 2018).

The other large private company is *Árvakur*. It publishes *Morgunblaðið*, Iceland's oldest newspaper, with historical links to the conservative Independence Party. The paper dominated the newspaper market for most of the 20th century, both in circulation terms and revenue. However, it lost its leading position when free papers entered the scene. Its online counterpart, *mbl.is*, has, though, from its foundation in 1998, been the most-read online news site in Iceland. As of recently, *Árvakur* also operates a radio station and a book publishing company. It was near bankruptcy after the financial crash in 2008 and was taken over by one of the banks and sold to a group of investors with ties to the fishing industry in 2009 (Kolbeins 2015; Guðmundsson 2013). The new owners hired as Editor-in-Chief Mr Davíð Oddsson, a leading politician for decades in Iceland, former prime minister, leader of the Independence Party, and subsequently the governor of the Central Bank when the Icelandic banks collapsed. The hiring of Mr Oddsson was highly controversial, and many are said to have cancelled their subscription to the paper in protest (Árnason et al. 2010; Fontaine 2009).

In addition to these private companies, there is *RÚV*, Iceland's public service broadcaster. It has maintained a strong and stable position in the media market

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[19] According to an agreement with the Icelandic Competition Authority, Sýn hf is committed to operating a news service for at least three years unless significant, negative developments in market conditions call for a change (Samkeppniseftirlitið 2017).

despite increasing competition, not least by online media (Ohlsson 2015). Table 1 shows the market share of the largest channels in Iceland (TV and radio) from 2008 to 2017. Table 2 illustrates *RÚV*'s market share in comparison to PBS stations in the other Nordic countries. As shown, it has the largest share of all stations in the five countries.

Table 1. Broadcasting companies' audience marketing share in Iceland 2008-2017

Channel	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
RÚV-TV	50	48	50	50	57	58	62	51	53	53
365 Media TV	33	37	40	42	35	33	33	31	29	32
Other	17	15	10	9	7	8	5	18	18	15
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
RÚV-Radio	54	55	47	55	50	51	51	51	51	51
365-Bylgjan	33	30	35	34	34	34	34	33	34	46
Other private radio	13	15	18	14	16	15	15	16	15	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	101

Source: Nordicom. TV broadcasting companies' audience shares 2008–2017 and radio channels' daily reach 2008–2017 (%). Age range: 12–80 years old. *Note*: All percentages are rounded to the nearest full point. They, therefore, may not add to 100%.

Table 2. Public service TV audience shares in the Nordic countries 2008-2017

Channel	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
RÚV (Iceland)	50	48	50	50	57	58	62	51	53	53
DR (Denmark)	29	27	28	28	29	31	34	34	37	37
TV2 (Denmark)	31	29	28	27	24	23	24	24	25	25
Yle (Finland)	45	44	45	44	42	42	44	43	45	43
NRK (Norway)	38	39	41	41	41	41	38	40	39	40
SVT (Sweden)	34	33	35	35	37	35	35	36	36	36

Source: Nordicom: Public service TV audience shares 2000–2017 (%). Based on TV-meter data from the national survey institutes responsible for the official TV surveys.

Another large actor in the media market is the company *Frjáls fjölmiðlun*, which publishes the tabloid newspaper *DV,* its online counterpart *dv.is,* and several other online news and entertainment sites. The company's sole registered owner is a well-known lawyer in Iceland. *DV* has had a somewhat rocky past. Its ownership has changed hands several times and so has its publication frequency. It is now published once a week (Guðmundsson 2017).

In addition, the Icelandic news media market encompasses one weekly business paper, *Viðskiptablaðið*, and two national online news sites that do not have links

to traditional media. Both online news sites, *stundin.is* and *kjarninn.is*, were founded by journalists, and, though not the most read sites in the country, they have been quite influential and often cited in the mainstream media. *Stundin.is* is subscription-based and is also published in print twice a month. It is mostly owned by the journalists that founded it, and no shareholder has a share larger than 12% (Fjölmiðlanefnd 2018). *Kjarninn* is financed by advertising, and its content is open to everyone, but it also receives substantial revenue from a monthly voluntary subscription (RÚV 2017). The largest shareholders are two investors from the IT industry, with a 16–17% share respectively and two of the founders with a 12–14% share (Fjölmiðlanefnd 2018).

It is a distinctive characteristic of the Icelandic press market that it has 'produced neither elite-oriented quality papers nor extremely populistic tabloids' (Karlsson 2004, p. 242). In a market as small as the Icelandic one there is little room for readership segregation based on purchasing capacity and other socio-economic divisions, and Icelandic newspapers mostly cater to the general public. The strong position of the free papers in the Icelandic media market is also somewhat unique. In 2010 Iceland and Luxemburg were the only European countries where the penetration of free newspapers was higher than that of their paid-for counterparts (Bakker 2013; Karlsson 2009). The free papers have been general purpose papers with serious coverage of domestic and international news, not down-market tabloids, and delivered to people's homes (Bakker 2008).

Newspaper circulation and readership in Iceland has traditionally been very high, but it is declining, as shown in Figure 1. The publication of the free paper *Fréttablaðið* in 2002[20] did increase newspaper penetration (Karlsson 2004), or at least postponed its decline, but its circulation is also dwindling. Whilst newspaper readership has been in steady decline, online news reaches increasingly more people. By far the most visited online sites are *Árvakur*'s *mbl.is* and *visir.is* (which belonged to *365 Media*, and now to *Sýn),* as shown in Figure 2.

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[20]*Fréttablaðið* was originally founded in 2001 but went bankrupt, and its publication was ceased. It was subsequently taken over and restored in 2002 by the present owners.

Figure 1. Newspaper readership in Iceland 2003–2018
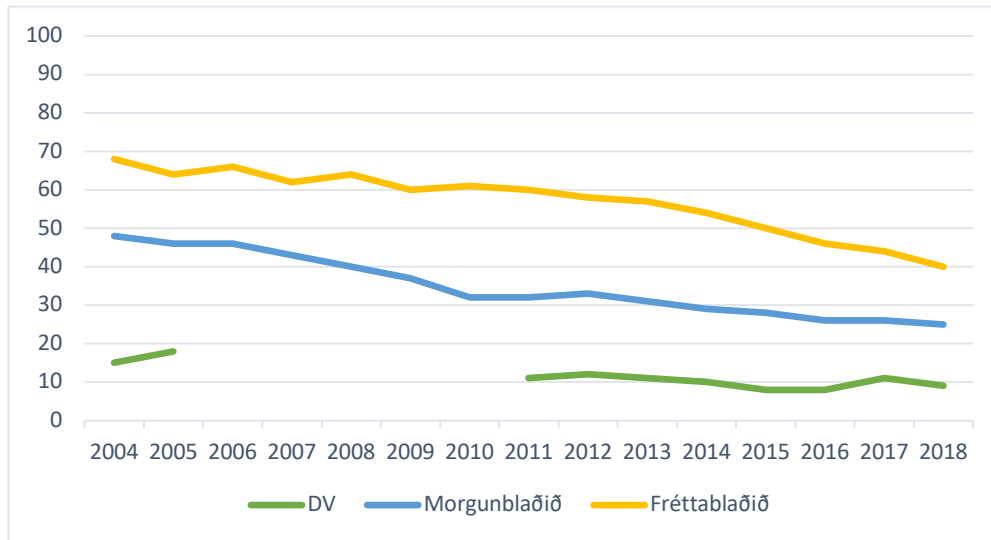
Source: Gallup (%). *DV* did not take part in the readership measure in 2005–2011.

Figure 2. Daily average reach of main online news sites in Iceland
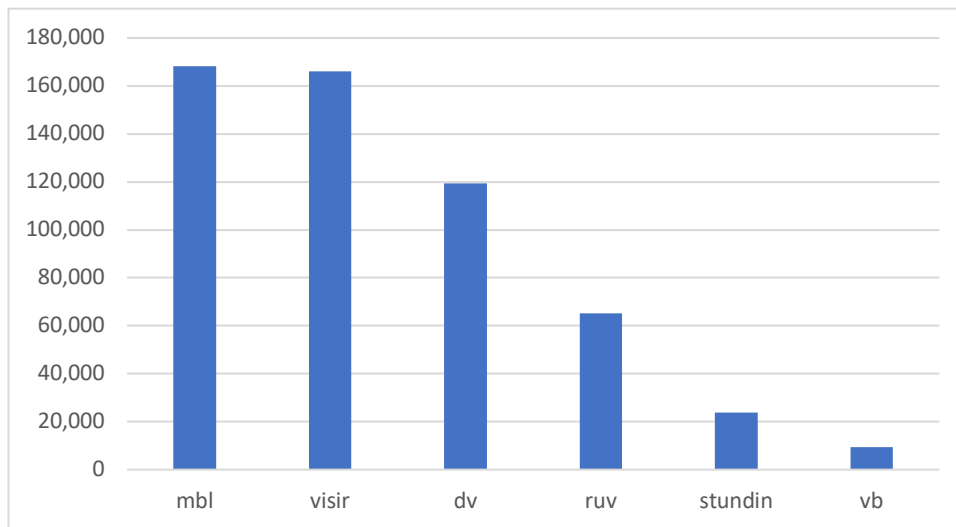
Source: Gallup. Week 06 2019. Note: *Kjarninn* was not included here but in previous weeks it had similar reach as *Stundin*.

Like in the other Nordic countries, the internet is widely spread and used in Iceland. According to the latest figures from Eurostat, Iceland has the highest percentage of internet use in Europe. Ninety-nine per cent of Icelanders between the ages of 16 to 74 *use* the internet regularly, compared to 98% in Denmark, 97% in Norway, 94% in Finland and 92% in Sweden (Eurostat 2019). Social media is extensively used, and the Eurostat figures show that 91% of Icelanders use the internet to access social media regularly, whilst the average in the EU is only 56%.

Facebook is by far the most popular social media platform in Iceland. According to an Icelandic survey from 2018, a total of 93% of Icelanders use Facebook regularly, whilst the second most popular platform is Snapchat (67%). Other popular social media platforms include YouTube (66%), Spotify (51%) and Instagram (45%) (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2018).

In economic terms, the Icelandic media expanded tremendously towards the end of the past century and in the first years of the 21st century. From 1995 to 2008, television revenue more than doubled. In radio, the revenue growth was 56%, and in newspapers 51% (online editions included) (Statistics Iceland 2018; Karlsson 2009). The number of publications and outlets grew considerably. At the peak in 2006–2007, Iceland had five national daily newspapers and three TV stations delivering news, including one 24/7 news channel (Jóhannsdóttir 2015). The new media system that emerged at the beginning of the 21st century was, however, not only characterised by a high supply of all forms of media but also by increasing commercialisation, convergence and ownership concentration (Hardarson 2008).

Puppis (2009) argues that small states may allow for cross-media ownership and do without restrictions on ownership concentration to foster a strong domestic media industry, and that is precisely the argument used in the statement that accompanied Iceland's Media Act in 2011 (Act no. 38/2011). Media companies are, however, required to make their ownership public. The law also had several new provisions intended to strengthen editorial independence and protect journalists against improper ownership influence as well as a clause on the rights of journalists to protect their sources. With the Media Act, a new administrative commission was established (The Media Commission), which carries out the supervision of the media market according to the act and attends to day-to-day administration in the fields covered by the law (Act no. 38/2011).

The impact of the financial crisis on the news media
Iceland was particularly badly hit by the financial crisis in 2008. The ensuing political and economic turmoil in the country has received substantial academic

attention from political scientists, economists, sociologists and historians (e.g. Indriðason et al. 2017; Bernburg 2016; Johnsen 2014; Jónsson 2009; Jóhannesson 2009). Scant attention has, however, been paid to investigating developments in the Icelandic media in the aftermath of the crisis, even though the crisis affected the media in many ways. Between 2007 and 2010, the revenues of media companies declined by approximately a quarter, and they are still 17% lower than before the financial crisis (Statistics Iceland 2018).

As Guðmundsson (2016, p. 41) details, the total turnover of the five largest media companies 'almost halved between the years 2007 and 2009, measured in fixed prices.' The turnovers of the two largest private media companies, *365 Media* and *Árvakur*, plummeted by 48–49%. According to Statistics Iceland, the advertising revenue of the media fell by 68% from its peak in 2007 to 2009, calculated in 2015 fixed prices (Statistics Iceland 2017b). As a result, some publications ceased to exist, and others downsized. Almost a third of journalists were laid off, including many experienced journalists (Jóhannsdóttir 2015; Kolbeins 2012). This sizeable decline seems to have occurred in the individual media outlets with similar force. According to Guðmundsson (2016), *365 Media* laid off 22% of its journalists, *RÚV* 26%, and *Árvakur* 31%. At other news media outlets, 33% of journalists lost their jobs.

The Icelandic news media was heavily criticised for its performance in the years leading up to the crisis. The Icelandic parliament established a Special Investigation Commission (SIC) in December 2008 to investigate the causes of the collapse of the Icelandic banks (Act no. 142/2008). It published a highly critical report in April 2010. The report concluded that the banks, politicians, and public institutions in Iceland were at fault. One of the main problems identified was that divisions of tasks between representatives and administrators of governmental institutions were often unclear, and no one was willing to admit responsibility for mistakes made (Hreinsson et al. 2010). The SIC report also argued that the news media had largely failed in its watchdog role in the coverage of the financial sector prior to the collapse and had instead mainly echoed the positive discourse presented by the PR departments of the banks (Árnason et al.

2010). The Union of Icelandic Journalists established its own committee to review the SIC report and concluded that the critique was, in many ways, well deserved. Professionalism in Icelandic journalism was said to be under-developed and intertwined with the political system and other forces of power, which had been exposed as the prime motors of the financial crisis. The committee also stressed that the working conditions were difficult for journalists, as editorial offices were poorly financed and understaffed (Blaðamannafélag Íslands 2010).

As noted previously, trust in various institution fell drastically following the financial crisis. Confidence in the media was not measured regularly in Iceland before the crisis, but the company Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir (Market and Media Research) has measured it following the crisis. In a survey conducted in May 2009 (following the 'pots and pans' protests and the fall of the government in February of that year), trust in the media as a whole had fallen from 23% to an even lower 15%. In the years following, that confidence level has never reached higher than 19% (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2016). In an international comparison, trust in the Icelandic media ranks low. However, many surveys show that faith in the media is declining in most countries, and this can therefore be seen as a larger international trend.[21]

Trust in 'the media' or 'the press' as an institution is one thing, and confidence in individual media outlets is another. As seen in Table 3, trust in most Icelandic outlets is considerably higher than in the media as a whole from 2009–2016. Trust in *RÚV* has remained consistently highest during this whole period, from 69%–79%.

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[21] For example, the 2017 Reuters Digital News Report (Newman et al. 2017) asked about overall trust in news media, and all Nordic countries apart from Iceland were included in the study. It found that 62% of Finns had overall trust in news media (the highest of any country in the survey), and the same was true of 50% of Danes, 49% of Norwegians, and 42% of Swedes. Trust was considerably lower in many other countries participating in the study, including France (30%), and the lowest trust numbers were recorded in South-Korea (23%) and in Greece (23%), which, like Iceland, was particularly badly hit by the financial crisis.

Table 3. Trust in Icelandic media outlets. Percentage of those saying that they trust the outlets 'very much' or 'fairly much'

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2016
RÚV news	70	79	72	75	77	71	69
Channel 2 news	36	44	42	45	44	41	41
Mbl.is	54	52	50	51	50	47	41
Morgunblaðið	52	46	43	45	46	41	37
Fréttablaðið	34	35	37	41	39	35	30
Vísir.is	24	30	33	35	35	34	33
Viðskiptablaðið	22	26	26	33	31	26	27
Stundin	…	…	…	…	…	…	26
Kjarninn	…	…	…	…	…	27	31
DV	4	9	9	10	10	14	7

Source: MMR. *Note*: Figures following 2016 have not been released by the company and no data was reported in 2015.
… Data not available

The advertising revenue of the Icelandic media has increased during the last decade, but is now only around 75% of what it was at its all-time-high in 2007, calculated in fixed 2016 prices (Statistics Iceland 2018). Again, this is not unique to Iceland. Advertising revenue for the media in the other Nordic countries, for example, declined by 15% in Norway and by 25% in Finland from 2008 to 2015, in 2008 fixed prices (Ohlsson and Facht 2017). A comparable figure for Iceland is 23% (Statistics Iceland 2018).

Iceland: A (not so) Nordic media system?
Nordic media is often used as an example of media industries that have been able to provide their users with socially relevant content and at the same time flourish as successful businesses. Furthermore, Nordic citizens repeatedly rank high in international comparisons of political knowledge (e.g. Curran et al. 2009). In the book *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*, Syvertsen et al. (2014) posit that despite changes in the media environment, media policy in the Nordic countries still rests on the assumption that the media is a part of the culture in society and therefore should not be left entirely in the hands of the market. The media system in Iceland has in some respects developed in a way similar to the other Nordic countries, but there are also important differences.

Hardarson (2008) places the country within the democratic corporatist model but makes a distinction between the old system, which shared some features with the polarised pluralist model, and the new media system of the 21st century, which 'clearly has moved towards the liberal model in many respects' (p. 79). Other Nordic academics have argued that neoliberalism has been more influential in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries and that its media system has moved closer to the liberal model (Ahva et al. 2017; Syvertsen et al. 2014).

Corporatism is less developed in Iceland than in the other Nordic states, as outlined earlier in the chapter in relation to Icelandic politics. State involvement has been limited to *RÚV* in Iceland, whilst all other media outlets are based on commercial grounds. This is in stark contrast to the other four states, which also support private media outlets. Moreover, private media has not been subject to regulation or requirements aimed at ensuring media pluralism and public service journalism in the same way that that private media in the other Nordic countries has (Karlsson & Broddason 2019; Guðmundsson & Kristinsson 2017). 'To this extent, Iceland does not fit into the model of an active state vis-a-vis the media that is commonly used to describe the Nordic media system' (Ohlsson 2015, p. 27).

Whilst the Icelandic media system has moved towards a more commercialised model, there are also indications of increased partisanship – or instrumentalisation – of the media in the last decade. Owners of private media companies have openly claimed that their objective was to influence attitudes in society. As mentioned earlier, in 2009 a group of investors with interests in the fishing industry acquired the publishing company *Árvakur.* In a TV interview, one of the shareholders said that the clear objectives of the investment had been to influence public debates and political decisions on controversial political issues at the time (Hringbraut 2016). Another example is the decision by *Exista* (a big investment company) in 2007 to invest in the 'not so profitable' business paper *Viðskiptablaðið.* One of the owners said this was necessary, since almost all other media outlets were in the hands of what were then the country's two other main business blocks (Exista 2007).

Guðmundsson (2013) argues that elements of political parallelism have carried over into the new era of commercial media. The perception of a connection between traditional media and political parties is deep-rooted. Guðmundsson argues that the historical proximity of political parallelism, a relatively recent professionalisation of journalists, an unregulated media environment, and an 'extreme ownership concentration of the media, where ownership powers and political parties became mixed with each other' have led to the development of a 'Politically Commercial Media System' (p. 510). Ohlsson and Facht (2017) also remark that the Icelandic media market is 'characterised by a comparatively tight bond between the political sphere and the domestic enterprise sector' and that links with external stakeholders contribute 'to the relationships in the media market being more problematic than they are in the other Nordic countries' (p. 93).

Iceland has a history of the state playing a large role in the economy (Kristinsson 1996), just like the states in the polarised pluralist countries in Southern Europe. Hallin and Papathanassopoulos (2002) argue that this is 'crucial to understanding why capitalists are so deeply involved in politics that they will waste their money starting or buying newspapers: political influence is crucial to success in business' (p. 183). A weak media regulatory body is another element Iceland has in common with the polarised pluralist countries. The Icelandic Media Commission has broad function and duties but has from the start been underfinanced and understaffed (Jóhannsdóttir 2015). Its board of five and staff of three are responsible for supervising the Icelandic media market, both private media and *RÚV*, in accordance with Iceland's media legislation. This includes collecting and publishing data about the media market as well as handling complaints about individual media outlets' conduct. The commission's role is also to promote media literacy and diversity in the media and to guard freedom of speech and the public's right to information, to name but a few of its many duties (Fjölmiðlanefnd 2018).

As shown previously, *RÚV* holds a very strong position in the media market in Iceland, even in a Nordic comparison. It appears to retain a high level of legitimacy and enjoys far more trust than other media in Iceland. Hallin and Mancini (2004, p. 167) posit that the Nordic countries tend to organise their PBS companies in 'the direction of the professional model, according to which the running of Public Service Broadcasting is left to professionals in order to avoid political involvement.' Moe and Mjøs (2013, p. 88) also argue that the 'running and supervision of Public Service Broadcasting in the Nordic countries are characterized, although in different ways and to varying degrees, by a separation between the institutions and the political powers.' These studies did not include Iceland. Karlsson and Broddason (2019) argue that *RÚV* enjoys less institutional autonomy than PBS companies in the other Nordic countries. Policy and regulations around the Nordic PBS companies have generally been rather stable, whereas legislation regarding *RÚV* has been subject to frequent changes, depending on the composition of the political majority in parliament at the time. In 2013, *RÚV* was made a state-owned limited company. The stated intent was to increase its autonomy from the legislative and executive powers. However, it has been argued that the change from a license fee to a broadcasting tax to finance its operations has created a very unclear situation for the company and actually made it more dependent on the state (Engblom 2013).

Professionalism in journalism started to develop in Iceland somewhat later than in the other Nordic countries. The reasons are primarily rooted in the stronghold of the party press, which meant that politics and political views were an important indicator of a person's ability to work in the media, whilst professionalism was not held in particularly high regard in the field. This changed rapidly as the politicians' hold on the media started to weaken. The education of journalists has greatly improved, and just over two-thirds of Icelandic journalists have a university degree (Kolbeins 2012). However, in an international context this is not particularly high. Data from the Worlds of Journalism Study show that in 53 of the 67 countries studied, 75% or more of the journalists have some form of a university education. Furthermore, formal education in journalism is not nearly as common in the Icelandic media as it is in the other Nordic countries. A

quarter of Icelandic journalists have a formal degree in journalism or media studies, compared to 56% in Finland, 64% in Norway, 68% in Sweden and 82% in Denmark. In fact, according to the Worlds of Journalism Study, of the 67 countries that took part, only in Bhutan (23%) and Japan (12%) are the percentages of journalists with journalism degrees lower than in Iceland (Worlds of Journalism Study 2016).

Journalists in small media systems can be seen to be more constrained than journalists in the larger countries. Small audience markets and small advertising markets translate into small job markets, which in general means fewer employers, fewer senior positions and fewer alternatives in terms of career routes and progression (Örnebring & Lauk 2010). All Icelandic media companies are small in international comparisons, and, as Hardarson states, 'staff-shortages seriously limit Icelandic journalists' possibilities for high-class journalism' (2008, p. 80). Journalists are seldom specialists, which may make them more dependent on their sources, including high-level politicians, and the small job market can make them less resistant to commercial pressures and ownership power.

Karlsson notes that in Iceland 'there has strangely enough been virtually unanimous agreement across the political spectrum from the right to the left, contending that the press and the private media in general should be left to themselves' (Karlsson 2004, pp. 227–228). Before the financial crisis in 2008, that was also the prevalent view of private media companies and the Union of Icelandic Journalists. However, this view is changing. A committee established in December 2016 to examine the economic situation of private media in Iceland concluded that it was worrying, especially in light of the media's important role in democratic societies. The committee put forward several proposals to ease the difficulties, including, for example, lowering the value-added tax (VAT) on online media subscription and refunding up to 25% of news production cost (Menntamálaráðuneyti 2018).

The Minister of Education and Culture introduced draft legislation proposing press subsidies for private media in late January 2019. The draft has been placed

in a public consultation process. According to the draft, news media companies that fulfil certain requirements, e.g. publishing regularly for the general public, producing diverse content of societal importance, and reporting original content (at least in part), will be eligible for a refund of up to one quarter of their production cost (Mennta- og menningarmálaráðuneytið 2019). If it becomes law, the new bill constitutes a major change in Icelandic media policy.

This section outlined key players and developments in the Icelandic media and political landscapes. This serves a dual purpose. First, this information provides a contextual framework for the analysis conducted in subsequent chapters. The information presented here is referred to in relation to relevant empirical and theoretical material. Second, this illustrates key differences between Iceland and the other Nordic countries in relation to its media system. This is important to establish since it forms an integral part of the foundation for the academic interventions later in the thesis.

To sum up, the Icelandic media system differs from the other Nordic countries in several key ways. Apart from *RÚV*, all Icelandic media outlets have, up until now, been run on commercial grounds with no support from the state. This is a fundamental difference compared to the other Nordic countries, which all support private outlets. Available studies and data paint a picture of a highly commercial media system with underdeveloped journalistic professionalism compared to most western countries, and without the public service requirements and public support of private media that characterises the democratic corporatist countries. Even though *RÚV* is in a comparatively strong position in Iceland, research indicates that it has been less sheltered from commercial forces and political influence than its Nordic counterparts (Karlsson & Broddason 2019; Kristinsson 2012). Remnants of political parallelism from the past have carried over to a new media system moving closer to a commercial model, and Iceland shares similarities with the polarised pluralist countries when it comes to a weak media regulatory body and a tight bond between the political and business spheres (Ohlsson & Facht 2017; Guðmundsson 2013).

Conclusions

Two key areas of difference between Iceland and the Nordic states presented in this chapter set the stage for the interventions into established academic debates laid out in subsequent chapters. The following chapter introduces the relevant literature concerning the ideal democratic roles of the media, the breakdown of the legacy media, journalist-politician relations, and the democratic potential of the internet. The discussion in the present chapter provides a foundation for the interventions into these debates as they relate to the Icelandic case.

First, *smallness* is important in terms of the media system, but also in relation to the small state social ecology. As illustrated, a small media system can be structurally more vulnerable than a larger one. Resource constraints are more severe and the advertising market is small. This can make it very difficult for commercial media outlets to operate, particularly in times when funding models are collapsing. In the thesis, I expand the size variable in relation to smallness to not only focus on structural aspects but also *socio-cultural* elements. As highlighted later, boundaries are blurred, people are close on multiple levels, and personalism is dominant. How might structural *and* socio-cultural factors related to smallness impact the democratic function of the media? How does this affect the relationship between journalists and politicians and the possibilities for the media to serve as a watchdog on those in power, and to stage a public debate?

Second, the chapter showed that, unlike in the other Nordic countries, Icelandic authorities have, up until now, not supported private media outlets. Neoliberalism has been more influential in Iceland than in the other four countries as it relates to the media market. What this means is that the private media outlets (outlets except *RÚV*) have all been operating *strictly on commercial grounds in a tiny market* that was severely hit during the financial crisis. Private media outlets have mostly been in the hands of powerful business blocks, and owners have explicitly stated that their intent has been to influence public debates.

This mix of smallness and commercialisation is a key factor in understanding political dissemination in Iceland, as shown in subsequent chapters. Apart from this, the chapter outlined much of the existing research on media and politics in Iceland. Points raised briefly in this chapter will be explored in more detail later in the thesis. This overview highlights important gaps in the political communication literature as it relates to Iceland. Much of the existing research has focused on structural overviews of the media and political systems, attempting to compare Iceland to the frameworks presented by Hallin and Mancini, and mapping ownership concentration.[22] There is a noticeable gap in three key areas of research, which will be explored subsequently in relation to the framework set out in this chapter. The focus now moves to the academic interventions related to these gaps.

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[22] As shown later on in relation to relevant debates, limited research has also been conducted on commercialisation in print and online media, as well as politicians' usage of social media during election campaigns.

CHAPTER 3:
Literature review –
The news media in crisis, journalist-politician relations
and the democratic potential of the internet

This chapter constructs three interlinked theoretical frameworks for the subsequent analysis. It outlines the relevant political communication literature and how the Icelandic case is used to stage interventions into established debates. As discussed earlier, the thesis fills three research gaps on Iceland and, at the same, expands and re-energises existing paradigms. A normative reference point serves as an overall conceptual framework: the democratic roles of the news media. The chapter begins by sketching these out, illustrating the democratic ideals of the media serving as a watchdog, providing a sphere for information and debate, and representing the people (Curran 2002). The following debates highlight threats to the these democratic roles, as well as a possible saviour.

First, the chapter shows how legacy news media outlets are increasingly struggling to fulfil their democratic roles due to several factors, including the collapse of funding models, increased commercialisation, and the digitisation of news (e.g. Ohlsson & Facht 2017; Lee-Wright et al. 2012). It is argued that this has led to more superficial sound bite coverage at the expense of critical in-depth political reporting that aims to hold power to account and disseminate important information. This can be linked to arguments concerning how politicians adapt their behaviour to suit the increasingly superficial needs of the media (e.g. Strömbäck & Esser 2014). Put simply, the news media is breaking down and cannot fulfil its democratic roles. This has implications not just for the media but also politics and democracy. How are people supposed to be informed citizens if the 'fourth estate' cannot do its job, and politicians are increasingly speaking in sound bites to supply the media with what it 'needs'?

The media markets in the Nordic states are routinely used as examples of media industries that have been able to provide their users with socially relevant content and at the same time flourish as successful businesses. A key reason for this is that these rich states have supported public and private media outlets

more so than most other states (e.g. Ahva et al. 2017). As a result, during these troubled times for the news media around the world, one would presume that Iceland, like the other Nordic states, should not see its legacy media breaking down to the same extent as elsewhere. My intervention illustrates that a closer examination appears to show the reverse to be the case. Iceland has been routinely ignored in the political communication literature, and the previous chapter showed that it has a much smaller and more commercialised media market than the other four Nordic countries.

Second, key debates concerning the relationship between journalists and politicians are outlined. This literature is also linked to the democratic roles of the media, since this relationship is a vital part of the news media's effective functioning. Much of the existing literature has illustrated extensive professional interactions between politicians and journalists whilst being mostly detached from the public. The underlying parameters in this literature concern the separation between public and private networks, and the emphasis has routinely been on investigating the journalist-politician relationship within certain 'bubbles', such as Westminster (e.g. Davis 2010).

The small state social ecology outlined previously suggests that the relationship between politicians and journalists in a small state like Iceland should be somewhat different from the larger states. Socially close relationships, and less distance between elites and the public in small states, opens up new lines of enquiry in examining the relationship between journalists and politicians. Based on the small state literature, Icelandic politicians and journalists can be expected to be closely connected in a complex web, where boundaries between the public and the private are often blurred, and connections multi-layered and deep. This can complicate their working relationship, as well as political coverage in the media. Since boundaries are more blurred in small states, it is problematic to exclude the public from analysis related to the politician-journalist relationship, as is done in much of the existing literature.

The breakdown of the news media and a complicated small state relationship between journalists and politicians paints a rather bleak picture of the news media in Iceland, when evaluated in terms of the normative democratic ideals. However, the third framework illustrates a possible saviour: the internet. The final section of the chapter engages with the literature on the internet and its democratic potential in facilitating a digital public sphere. Much of the early literature on the internet was highly positive concerning its democratic potential. It was argued that the internet would engender democratic participation through online channels, and that it could increase the public's access to democratic representatives (e.g. Theocharis et al. 2016). This argument is problematic. It has, for example, been shown that it is difficult to examine the internet outside of existing and unequal power structures within societies. Many people do not have access to the internet; it is mainly well-off and educated individuals who engage with political issues online, and a barrier still exists between elites and the public online. Politicians are mostly communicating in a 'broadcast style', with little two-way interaction taking place between politicians and citizens (e.g. Wojcik & Hughes 2019; Jungherr 2016).

The existing literature on the democratic potential of the internet misses a particular type of case which problematises to some extent its current foundations and parameters, and opens up new lines of inquiry. Iceland can be seen as the ideal case to test the optimist democratic argument for the internet. It is a society that is small, informal, highly educated, politically engaged, equal (in a comparative context), and where access to the internet is virtually 100%. Thus, it can be argued that if the internet should work anywhere as a type of digital public sphere, it would be in Iceland. One cannot look to existing power structures in the small state as inhibiting democratic participation online, as is argued in much of the mainstream scholarship focusing on larger democracies.

The three frameworks set out in the chapter begin to unpack a limitation of existing political communication scholarship in these areas of study. Based on these, I argue that an underlying assumption guides much of the existing literature in these areas. At its core, we find the large or medium sized western

democratic state, and this starring role has contributed to the construction of parameters and foundations that have mapped and engendered much of the research agenda. So, what might possibly change when we examine a much smaller state like Iceland?

3.1. The ideal democratic roles of the news media

This first section briefly outlines the ideal democratic roles of the news media, and, in relation to certain aspects of these roles, it discusses how the media can be seen to facilitate a public sphere. The aim is not to present a detailed discussion concerning different aspects of democratic theory as it relates to the news media. Instead, this part of the chapter simply constructs a normative reference point that serves as an overall conceptual framework for the following three sections. What the subsequent academic debates all have in common is that they illustrate threats or opportunities in relation to these democratic roles.

Watchdog, information and debate, and representing the people
The literature focusing on the public's access to political information often emphasises that in (large or medium sized) contemporary democracies, citizens receive most of their information regarding the political issues of the day through the mass media. The media and news journalism are seen as key components of contemporary democracies, providing vital information and platforms for deliberation and action (e.g. Lee-Wright et al. 2012; McNair 2012; Fenton 2010a). Curran et al. (2009) argue that political accountability in democracies requires a media system that delivers a sufficient amount of meaningful public affairs information to catch the eye of the citizens. A viable democracy can only survive if citizens have the chance to secure an enlightened understanding of political processes (e.g. Banducci et al. 2015; Pfetsch & Esser 2012; Delli Carpini & Keeter 1996).

'The principal democratic roles of the media are to monitor power, and to act as an agency of information and debate' (Aalberg & Curran 2012b, p. 188). More specifically, the traditional conception of the democratic roles of the media are 1)

the watchdog role, 2) an agency of information and debate, and 3) representing people to authority (Curran 2002). First, regarding the watchdog role, according to traditional liberal theory the principal role of the media is to act as a check on the state. It has been argued that the only way for the media to fulfil this role adequately is for it to be anchored to the free market. In this view, it is possible to ensure that the media is independent from government. This free market argument was deployed with great effect to justify broadcast deregulation. It can, however, be seen as problematic since it fails to take economic power, exercised by shareholders and managers, into account. A revised conception of the watchdog role is needed in which the media is 'conceived as being a check on *both* public and private authority' (Curran 2002, p. 219).

Second, the conception of the media being an agency of information and debate is often linked to media pluralism. The idea here is that the news media covers a plurality of views on the topic being covered to present a fair and objective balance to facilitate the function of democracy (e.g. Schudson 2008; Deuze 2007; McNair 2006). This can therefore also be seen to facilitate the watchdog role. The media briefs and helps voters to make an informed choice during elections. It also provides a channel of communication between the government and the people. Above all, the media provides a forum of debate in which people can identify problems, solutions, reach agreement and also guide the direction of society (Curran 2002, p. 225).

Representing people to authority is the third key democratic function of the media, according to traditional liberal theory. Having briefed the people and staged a debate, the media relays the public consensus that results from this debate to those in power. In this way the government is supervised by the people through the media between elections. Or, in more simple terms, it is often claimed that the media speaks for the people and represents their interests and views in the public domain (Curran 2002, p. 227). Interestingly, even though the media is seen to perform this important role in daily news reports between elections and other big events, academic attention has mostly focused on political news in the more atypical moments (e.g. Van Aelst & De Swert 2009).

It is now almost standard practice when discussing the democratic roles of the media to point out that these ideas were rejuvenated by the work of Habermas (1989). A normative conception of the media and the public sphere was constructed from his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. This conceives the public sphere as a space where access to information affecting the public good is widely available, where discussion is free of domination, and where all those participating in public debate do so on an equal basis. As Dahlgren (2005) argues, there are various problems and ambiguities in Habermas's original text on the public sphere. Yet, for those committed to a democratic society, the concept remains normatively and empirically compelling.

Although Habermas's book was initially published in 1962, it was not translated into English until 1989. In the book, Habermas examined the birth of the bourgeois public sphere and its subsequent demise as a sphere for rational debate. He argued that the bourgeois public sphere was public in the sense that it was distinguished from the private life of the family and the market, and that it was, furthermore, separate from the state. Habermas initially characterised the sphere as a place where individuals came together as a public to engage in a debate over the rules governing relations in the 'sphere of commodity exchange and social labour. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's use of their reason' (Habermas 1989, p. 27). This was a voluntary association of private citizens using their reason in unconstrained discussion and the agents of this new public sphere saw their activities as a check on those governing society.

Habermas (1989) demonstrated the development of the public bourgeois spheres in Britain, France, Germany and elsewhere. They were initially established through the emergence of a free printed press and physical spaces such as coffee houses and salons. The sphere was a space that existed between the private interests in civil society and the state. In principle, all people could enter into free public discussions as equals. 'The bourgeois public's critical debate took place in principle without regard to all pre-existing social and political rank and in accord with universal rules' (p. 54). However, in practice, these early

public spheres were in fact mainly composed of narrow segments of the population, namely educated propertied men who participated in a discourse not only exclusive of others but also prejudicial to the people excluded (Calhoun 1992, p. 3).[23]

The concept of the bourgeois public sphere can be seen as a normative ideal rather than an accurate historical description, and it does not represent contemporary (large or medium sized) 'actually existing democracies' (Fraser 1992). This normative ideal has been utilised to compare deliberative practice, identify deficiencies and suggest remedial action (Crack 2008, p. 15). The ideals on which the bourgeois spheres operated challenged the legitimacy of the previous rulers, the authoritarian state and interests that were shaping the post-feudal society. Apart from the apparent reduction of social status within public spheres, they furthermore opened subject agendas, emphasised deliberations as they related to the wider public good and exposed discussions to critical publicity (Habermas 1989).

The public sphere can be linked to the deliberative model of democracy. This approach emphasises that the media should provide an intelligent news service and also a forum of debate. 'Its current affairs coverage and mediated discussion should encourage civility, a shared pursuit of truth and a desire to understand other groups and viewpoints' (Curran 2011, p. 81). The link to the public sphere is apparent here since a fully functioning public sphere is seen as 'a space where all debates can be aired and issues discussed in a deliberative and rational manner' (Fenton 2018, p. 28). It is important to emphasise that the public is seen here as an *active participant* in the democratic process, through the public sphere. *Information* and *engagement* are key elements. Power is delegated to elected representatives on a regular basis and public sphere theory presupposes that voters will be informed through the information available, as well as through processes of deliberation. The idea is that voters 'will reach a rational

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[23] As Fraser (1992) argues, the discursive interaction within the bourgeois public sphere was governed by various protocols concerning style and decorum. These functioned informally to marginalise members of the plebeian classes and women, and prevented them from participating as peers in the debates.

understanding of all relevant issues. These processes of deliberation will then form a consensus view that is responded to by policy makers and, hey presto, liberal democracy is seen to be done' (Fenton 2018, p. 29).

To sum up, the democratic ideals of the media can be conceived as acting as a watchdog, serving as an agency of information and debate, and representing people to authority. Related to these ideals, the concept of the public sphere has been seen as a useful normative framework to illustrate how the media can present relevant viewpoints and facilitate critical public debates that should be open to all. This is important for the functioning of democracy. News has 'democratic value', which can be defined in the sense of having '*informative quality, enhancing people's understanding of the world on issues likely to empower them as citizens in a democracy*' (Cushion 2012, p. 2, emphasis in original).

It is not necessary for the media to be completely fulfilling its democratic roles in order for these roles to serve as a conceptual framework. Few would argue that news always reflects the interest of citizens and holds those in power to account. Agreement and rational discussion is a desirable outcome of the public sphere, but more realistically its value lies foremost in the facilitation of open and diverse discussions of public affairs (Papacharissi 2009a, p. 232). As Fenton (2010b) argues, there remains a sense of several things that news journalism should be doing: monitoring, holding to account, and facilitating and maintaining deliberation. This can be seen to form 'a line in the sand against which contemporary practice can be critiqued. It would be wrong, however, to see such an approach as peddling a 'golden age' thesis that harks back to a time that never was' (p. 3).

Put simply, these democratic roles can be seen as something to aim for, rather than being something that actually exists or has ever existed. The present chapter and the subsequent ones return to the democratic ideal roles of the media as outlined here. The discussion now moves to the state of the news media in the current media landscape.

3.2. The breakdown of the legacy media

This section illustrates how it is increasingly difficult for the news media to fulfil its democratic roles. This is linked to the fact that legacy media outlets, as well as their associated public spheres, are breaking down. Collapsing funding models have led to cost-cutting measures and resource constraints, which result in increasingly superficial news coverage. The importance of shrinking advertising revenue in a commercialised market further adds to the superficiality. Market-driven news values provide less incentive to publish in-depth material, and more emphasis is placed on catchy 'click bait' political coverage. As shown, it is not just that the legacy media coverage of politics is becoming increasingly superficial. The superficial coverage can, moreover, impact politicians' behaviour, and politics itself.

Perceptions of routine political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media have not been examined before. The discussion here makes an intervention into the 'breakdown literature' by illustrating how Iceland can be seen as a particularly exaggerated case when it comes to the breakdown of its legacy media. This has implications for how politics is covered in the Icelandic media.

A news media in crisis (in large and medium sized western democracies)
News has commonly been created within an industrial mode of production. Companies have brought together resources and equipment to gather, mass produce and disseminate news. To do this, legacy news companies have relied on trained and professional news workers to undertake the task (Picard 2014). News can be seen as a commodity and shaped by forces of supply and demand (Hamilton 2011). The 'industrialisation' of news is linked to two kinds of news: 'routine and exclusive' (Phillips 2012, p. 83). News is far from being a 'window to the world'. Rather, 'it delivers a highly partial prism through which to view and understand the world, consisting of a select few characters and countries, with a familiar set of conventions and practices and a relatively predictable agenda of concerns and anxieties' (Cushion 2012, pp. 49-50). Goals, ideals and values clearly matter, but it is also important to understand that how journalists make

news depends on their working environment and the practice of journalism (Fenton 2010b, p. 4). So, what does this environment look like today?

Reviewing the recent literature on the status of the news media leads to the quick realisation that many argue that the media has been in 'crisis' for some time (e.g. Siles & Boczkowski 2012; McChesney & Pickard 2011; Fenton 2011). The dominant narrative of the current situation often begins by observing that, following the deregulation of media industries, advanced democracies saw an increasingly competitive and 'free' media market. Tougher competition, as well as a more fragmented audience, has led to increasing commercialisation in the news media. Newspaper circulation has been falling, and shrinking legacy media profits have led to increasing resource constraints. The digitisation of the media landscape has accelerated recently, and the advent of social media and smartphones has made the news media landscape even more complicated and uncertain. News is usually free and easily available on the internet, and as increasingly more readers migrate online, so too does the advertising revenue, of which global companies such as Google and Facebook claim increasingly larger shares (Ohlsson & Facht 2017; Lee-Wright et al. 2012).

What this means is that the traditional funding model of the commercial 'industry' legacy news media is breaking down. As Phillips and Witschge (2012) illustrate, there is a crisis in the business model of news. It is not a crisis of demand but one of funding. Quality news production is not cheap. It requires a large number of highly trained personnel. Aggregation sites, together with fast online distribution, are undermining the main selling points of news outlets: being first in delivering news. 'There seems little reason to suppose that advertisers are going to take up the cost of news production across all these platforms, when they now have a plethora of different, and more direct, ways of getting to their audiences' (p. 4). What we are now witnessing is a far more volatile and unstable environment for news organisations than before. This illustrates that 'the major problem affecting traditional news providers is not the decline of audiences in and of itself but the degeneration of the existing news business model that tied together news and advertising' (Freedman 2010, p. 39).

Recent studies across North America, the United Kingdom, other parts of Europe, and the Nordic countries show how the news media is operating in an increasingly challenging landscape following the financial crisis (e.g. Ohlsson & Facht 2017; Ohlsson 2015; Siles & Boczkowski 2012; McChesney & Pickard 2011; Currah 2009). The difficulties of news production had been illustrated prior to the global financial crisis (e.g. Davis 2002; Franklin 1997), but the crisis arguably amplified the problems. Journalism had, for example, previously been described as 'McDonaldised' (Franklin 2005), and Davies (2008) discussed contemporary journalism as being done in a 'news factory' and defined it as 'churnalism' since journalists increasingly 'churn out' stories because of difficult working conditions. He found at the time that journalists in the United Kingdom had to fill three times as much space as they had done in the 1980s.

Increased competition, audience fragmentation, and less advertising revenue have all been linked to increasing commercialisation in the news media. Put simply, commercialisation of the news is commonly defined as market considerations having a stronger impact on editorial decisions than considerations of what would create the most public value (Preston 2009). In other words, what 'sells' is considered more important than the democratic ideals outlined in the previous section. This can be related to the work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) discussed earlier. In their study, they argued that what was increasingly taking place was a convergence of the European system towards the liberal model, and this was linked to the dynamics of commercialisation that had transformed the media. Recent empirical research has cast doubt on the convergence thesis. For example, in their comparative study, Aalberg and Curran (2012b) did not find a strong and sustained trend of convergence towards the liberal American model. They did find, however, that greater commercialism has influenced the media, both in the United States and in Europe. 'But these common trends have not forced media systems to become increasingly the same, in the US mold' (p. 193). So, even though the systems are not necessarily becoming more similar (like the US system), they are becoming more commercialised.[24]

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[24] Hallin and Mancini (2017) have recently stated that it is time to abandon a strong version of the convergence hypothesis. They also argue that it is clear that a degree of convergence has taken

As Jóhannsdóttir (2018) highlights, one of the central concerns of increased commercialisation is that the news media is prioritising entertainment over political reporting, or what has often been defined as 'soft news' over 'hard news'. This is commonly linked to similar wide terms such as 'tabloidisation' and 'infotainment' (Reinemann et al. 2012; Thussu 2007). Entertainment can, of course, be political (Curran 2011), and news can be entertaining without being 'dumbed down'. It can be argued that hard and soft binaries have some merit in broadly tracing shifts in news agendas over time, but they are also simplified and wide frameworks. In other words, they can be useful for examining the big picture, but miss the more nuanced elements in the coverage.[25]

The previous chapter discussed how media research on Iceland in general is lacking. However, in relation to the discussion here, three relevant studies have examined the commercialisation of newspapers in Iceland through the use of the soft news/hard news binary. In 2004, Karlsson found that commercialisation had increased considerably around the turn of the century, not least due to the arrival of free papers, and argued that this had led to a definite trend towards more entertainment news (Karlsson 2004). Guðmundsson (2012) came to a similar conclusion in a study of the three main Icelandic newspapers published in 2008–2010. The proportion of soft news in major printed newspapers had increased considerably from previous years. In all three papers, soft news constituted more than half (51–56%) of the total number of news items analysed, compared to 24–27% soft news and 73–76% hard news in 2005. Guðmundsson also observed a high level of similarity in content and suggested that homogenisation was increasing considerably in the Icelandic press, as has been shown to be the case elsewhere (e.g. Redden & Witschge 2010). In her more recent study, Jóhannsdóttir (2018) also included the online sites of the two main newspapers in Iceland (*Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið*), and found that the amount of soft

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place in the European system towards the liberal model, and this is linked to the rise of commercial television, the decline of the party press, and changes in journalism conventions.

[25] Characterising trends in news coverage entirely by these classifications can simplify the complexity of what journalism delivers (Cushion 2012). There is no consensus about what hard and soft news exactly is, how it should be defined or measured. Moreover, the concept has not been clearly differentiated from concepts addressing similar phenomena (Reinemann et al. 2012).

news increased in both print and online versions from 2005 to 2013. The increase was considerably more in the online version.

The online increase is not surprising, since it can be argued that online news is particularly susceptible to market pressures (e.g. Currah 2009). This is important to highlight since more and more journalists are now working online. For example, a recent study in the United Kingdom found that, since 2012, the proportion of journalists in the country working in newspapers has fallen from 56% to 44%, while the proportion working online has risen from 26% to 52% (Thurman et al. 2016). Fewer journalists have to fill more and more space, and there is increased pressure of constantly being first with the news throughout the day to get the important 'clicks' that are used as metrics to sell adverts. This has led to a change in working practices, and studies show that journalists working online have institutionalised the practice of publishing new information constantly (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski 2009). This is also the case with 24-hour news channels. As Lewis and Cushion (2009) illustrate, 'breaking news' has become an increasingly significant element of the 24-hour news culture. The typical breaking news item is becoming ever more predictable and their analysis found that breaking news items are less informed and feature less independent reporting than the more conventional items on the news.

In order to survive in an increasingly commercialised work environment, where being 'first' throughout the day is important, studies have shown that journalists are relying heavily on 'information subsidies' from social media (Broersma & Graham 2012) or PR material as sources for their stories. This has been the case for some time. A study in 2008 found that one in five newspaper stories and 17% of broadcast stories in the United Kingdom were verifiably derived mainly or wholly from PR material or activity (Lewis et al. 2008). As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Icelandic parliament established a Special Investigation Commission (SIC) in December 2008 to investigate the causes of the collapse of the Icelandic banks. It published a highly critical report in April 2010, which included a content analysis of news reports in the Icelandic media focused on the banks prior to the crisis (from 2006-2008). The report found that, in 4 out of 5

news reports, there was little or no original reporting conducted by the journalists in question. Many of the news reports concerning the Icelandic banks seemed to have originated solely from the PR departments of the banks. In 15% of the articles and reports examined, the only source material used was a press release from the companies in question. In 37% of the cases, a press release was part of the source material (Guðmundsson et al. 2010).

In sum, then, it appears to be the case that we are currently witnessing a news media environment with increased competition and audience fragmentation, and where much of the advertising revenue is migrating online to companies such as Google and Facebook. This is leading to a collapse in funding models for media outlets and is affecting how journalists work. They need to fill more space constantly throughout the day, and this can impact the content of the news reports. Original reporting instigated by the journalists themselves takes more time than relying on various information subsidies, and there is much emphasis placed on market-driven 'soft' commercialised news. So, what does this current climate mean for *political* coverage in particular?

Before the more recent 'crisis debates' concerning the breakdown of the legacy media funding models, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) argued that political journalism had been undermined by a strong market orientation, or an infotainment approach to politics (similar to the soft news argument). They illustrated that this also affected more established public service institutions like the BBC. It can be argued that politics is treated by the media like other subjects, being ultimately presented on the basis of the 'news values' of the media industry (Mazzoleni 2014, p. 43).

Much of the recent academic work on this media-politics relationship as it relates to media coverage of politics has been placed under the 'mediatization of politics' umbrella. This is based on the assumption that politics has become increasingly shaped by the media's own standards and what it considers newsworthy. Linked to the previous discussion on increased commercialisation and soft news, it should, then, not be surprising that the argument is that political coverage has

become more personalised as a result; there is less focus on policy discussions and more on horse race coverage and 'click friendly' headlines that politicians supply to overworked journalists. Political coverage has become more superficial, and research shows that politicians are increasingly image conscious and media-obsessed (Davis 2010).[26] Put simply, the media 'wants' simple, ready-made sound bites, and the politicians deliver. This is, therefore, not just a case of media coverage, but also of politicians' behaviour and *politics itself*.

Mazzoleni (2014) illustrates that, while mediatization research in many domains has been largely disregarded, it has gained significant attention in relation to the political sphere. The 'mediatization of politics' can be seen as part of the larger process of the 'mediatization of society',[27] but it is unique in the sense that mediatization assumes special importance wherever the exercise of power and various related relationships are involved. It is the result of significant media-driven influences within the political domain. The 'pressure on politics to adopt discursive strategies that have proved to be successful in the commercial domain has been so strong that mediatized discourse has become the accepted way for politics to address the citizenry' (p. 43). Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999, p. 250) define mediatized politics as 'politics that has lost its autonomy, has become dependent in its central functions on mass media, and is continuously shaped by interactions with the mass media.'

Strömbäck (2008) introduced the argument that mediatization can be split into four phases or dimensions. The first dimension is an environment in which the mass media constitutes the most important source of information about politics and society. The second phase is one in which the media has become independent from political and social bodies. The media is more autonomous than in the first dimension, and makes its own judgement regarding what is considered

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[26] The discussion on a media-driven politics can also be related to various other factors, such as the rise of market-oriented parties and the rise of celebrity culture. The emphasis here is on the media and commercialisation factors since they are relevant to the topic of the thesis.

[27] Strömbäck & Esser (2014a, p. 10) argue that one key aspect of mediatization is that the media now increasingly permeates 'all aspects of private, social, political, cultural and economic life, from the micro (individual) to the meso (organizational) and the macro (societal) level of analysis.'

appropriate messages. What distinguishes the third dimension from the second one is that the independence of the media has increased even further, and 'the daily operations have become so independent and important that political and other social actors have to adapt to the media, rather than the other way around' (p. 237). Finally, the fourth dimension sees the media's standards of newsworthiness becoming a built-in part of the governing process. If political actors adapt to the media logic in the third phase, then they can be seen to adopt the same logic in the fourth phase (Strömbäck & Esser 2014a).

The behaviour of politicians is increasingly guided by 'media logic', according to the mediatization of politics arguments.[28] This logic is based on the assumption that the media is guided mostly by its own logic and not by the needs of others, such as political actors (Mazzoleni 2008). According to this idea, 'the various media formats, production processes, and routines, as well as the need for compelling stories, shape how the media interpret and cover public affairs' (Strömbäck 2013, p. 372). In the current commercialised 'breakdown climate', the media coverage of politics is increasingly superficial. There is less focus on policy content and politicians become increasingly interested in managing their image by supplying the media with what it 'wants' (Gustafsson 2015).

Mediatization does not simply focus on media content. It is a process-oriented concept which illustrates the increased influence of the media (Strömbäck & Dimitrova 2011; Mazzoleni & Schulz 1999). Much of the existing mediatization literature examines the media as being a meta-process, that is, a first-order effect that influences everything else. Or, to put it more simply, it focuses on describing mediatization without analysing the wider forces that can be at play. As Lunt and Livingstone (2016) argue, we need to examine mediatization in relation to other processes in society, as is done here in relation to commercialisation. Market-driven news values in a tough environment for media outlets can be seen to lead

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[28] The term 'media logic' was initially coined by Altheide and Snow (1979).

to increasingly superficial mediatized coverage, and increasingly superficial politics as a result.[29]

What should we expect to find in a small and commercialised country like Iceland? Much of the 'breakdown literature' has focused extensively on the larger states like the United Kingdom and the United States (e.g. Lee-Wright & Phillips 2012; McChesney & Pickard 2011). Four relevant studies on Iceland were mentioned briefly in relation to the increase in soft news over hard news, and how the Icelandic media mainly echoed the positive discourse from the banks prior to the crisis. These studies showed, to an extent, similar findings from the larger countries. Soft news is increasing, and journalists are relying heavily on PR material. So is it then logical to conclude that Iceland is simply another case to add to the mix?

Another way of looking at this is that, since Iceland is one of the five Nordic countries, one would perhaps expect Iceland to be in a better place to tackle this breakdown threat than many other states. The Nordic states have been defined in relation to the tradition of the welfare state and democratic corporatism, and these characteristics are also apparent in the Nordic media landscape. These rich states have supported public and private outlets more than many other states (e.g. Brüggemann et al. 2014).

I argue that both of these explanations are problematic. Iceland is not simply another state that can be added to the mix, nor is it just like the other four Nordic countries. There should be many similarities between Iceland and other states previously studied, since Iceland is dealing with similar challenges concerning broken funding models. The mix of smallness and a heavily commercialised media market (as outlined in the previous chapter) suggests, however, that the situation in terms of the breakdown of the media should be even worse in Iceland than in the larger states.

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[29] This type of media content is also routinely examined through the lens of other concepts previously mentioned, such as soft news, tabloidisation and infotainment.

As highlighted previously, neoliberalism has been more influential in Iceland than in the other Nordic countries as it relates to its media market (Ahva et al. 2017; Syvertsen et al. 2014). Corporatism is less developed in Iceland than in the other four countries, and state involvement has been limited to *RÚV*, the public broadcasting service in Iceland, whilst all other media have been based on commercial grounds. And *RÚV* can also be seen as more commercialised than PBS stations in the other Nordic countries. It has, from its foundation, been allowed to carry advertisements and advertising sales amount to approximately 1/3 of its revenue. In this sense *RÚV* has always also been a commercial station (Broddason & Karlsson 2005). Simply put, Iceland's media market does not fit into the funding model commonly used to describe the Nordic media system (Ohlsson 2015).

Since the news media has less financial resources than before, it has been necessary to focus on cost-cutting, and one of the targets has been journalists. Almost a third of the Icelandic journalist population was laid off following the financial crisis, among them many experienced journalists (Jóhannsdóttir 2015; Kolbeins 2012). This was both the case at the private and public service outlets (Guðmundsson 2016). In comparison, newsroom employment in the US dropped by 23% from 2008 to 2017 (Grieco 2018).

I argue that it is important to move beyond the percentages here and focus on the actual size of the media market and legacy outlets. In 2016, there were 330 journalists in the whole of Iceland registered with the Union of Icelandic Journalists (Guðmundsson 2016). In comparison, the newsroom employment in the United States in 2018 was 88,000 (Grieco 2018) and the number of journalists working in the United Kingdom is estimated to be 73,000 (Spilsbury 2018).[30] There is a significant difference between 330 journalists in the small state of Iceland, versus 88,000 and 73,000 journalists in the two large states that are often front and centre in political communication studies and knowledge production. What might this difference mean in terms of journalistic working practices and political coverage?

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[30] These estimates from Iceland, the United States and the United Kingdom use somewhat different definitions focusing on level of employment and other factors.

Small media markets, like the one in Iceland, can be structurally more vulnerable than markets in larger democracies. As discussed previously, Puppis (2009) shows how small media markets face limitations on the production side compared to larger markets. Shortage of resources is a serious hurdle in news production. The markets are also limited on the sales side, with regard to advertising and audiences. The small size of the population sets limits to the possible revenues from advertising (p. 10). A small and vulnerable commercialised media market like the one in Iceland was therefore vulnerable to begin with, and the crisis and its aftermath made *an already vulnerable market even more vulnerable*. Which leads to the question: To what extent can the media, operating in this type of market, fulfil its democratic roles of holding those in power to account, disseminate important political information, and stage debates through mediated public spheres?

The issue of smallness cannot solely be defined in terms of structures, as shown in the previous chapter. Socio-cultural factors are also important. Later in the thesis it will be illustrated that the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland does not revolve around the legacy media to the extent that much of the media and democracy literature suggests. The media is very important, but small state nuances need to be incorporated into the research agenda. These nuances include various non-mediated interpersonal relations between elites and the public, proximity, blurred boundaries, and the impact of the small media market on the legacy media's potential to be a dominant player in politics. If future research is to include smaller states, there is a need to rethink certain underlying assumptions, as the research from Iceland illustrates. This is also the case when focusing more narrowly on the journalist-source relations literature.

3.3. The politician-journalist relationship

This section follows on from the breakdown and media-politics discussion by critically evaluating the relevant journalist-source relations literature, focusing mainly on political sources and their relationship with journalists. Most of the

more recent mediatization of politics literature has revolved around somewhat abstract debates or content analysis exploring specific mediatization dimensions in news reports (e.g. see discussion in Maurer & Pfetsch 2014). In contrast, the journalist-source literature emphasises a more detailed examination of the interactions between journalists and politicians. This is an important addition to the previous discussion, since a significant portion of political news comes from these interactions.

Much of the classic journalist-source relations literature has focused on power dynamics and examined which side is more 'in control'. Another related strand of research has investigated plurality in political news coverage and whether the media portrays a balance of sources. More recent research has illustrated that the politician-journalist relationship is interactive and co-determining, and that the intense and institutionalised relations between the two sides in private spheres play an important role in the social construction of politics itself (e.g. Dindler 2015).

The discussion in this section intervenes in these existing debates in two ways. First, the dominant portrayal of journalists and politicians interacting intensively in private sphere settings is problematic in relation to the Icelandic case. It is shown that there is a need to expand the framework in relation to the small state ecology outlined in the previous chapter. Second, since the emphasis has mostly been on politicians and journalists interacting in private settings, the role of the public has mostly been excluded from this literature. When it comes to the Icelandic case, the separation of elites and the public along these lines proves problematic.

Adversaries or jointly constructing politics?
The relationship between journalists and their political sources has been viewed as an important area of study, since it can be seen as a vital part of the debate concerning the news media's effective functioning in democratic societies. Davis (2010) defines the discussion and observation of journalist-source relations in terms of two analytical paradigms, the 'adversarial-exchange' line and the

investigation of 'pluralist-source conflict'. Many early studies focused on the former paradigm, which emphasises that the core issue is relative power. The autonomy of the journalists and the media as a fourth estate liberal watchdog is investigated through their sources. On a day-to-day basis the relationship between politicians and journalists is an uneasy working relationship. Both sides need each other but are pursuing differing professional objectives (e.g. Schudson 2011; Blumler & Gurevitch 1995).

Gans (1980) used a dance metaphor to describe journalist-source relations as co-operative and argued that it takes two to tango. Journalists need access, and politicians want publicity. What emerges is a 'tug of war', meaning that sources attempt to 'manage' the news and put the best light on themselves whilst journalists concurrently 'manage' the sources in order to try to extract the information they want. Cook (2005, p. 12) argues that what is taking place can be defined as the negotiation of newsworthiness. There are 'constant but implicit series of negotiations over who controls the agenda, what can be asked, where and how, and what a suitable answer will be.'

The pluralist source conflict paradigm, on the other hand, aims to compare how various sources seek to gain a media platform for their views and whether the news media adequately reflects pluralist opinion in both politics and society more generally (Davis 2010, p. 67). These analytical paradigms can therefore both be linked to the ideal democratic roles of the media discussed earlier, the former emphasising the watchdog role, and the latter presenting pluralist views in debates in the media, which can be linked to the discussion on media pluralism (e.g. Deuze 2007; McNair 2006).

Both paradigms are mostly concerned with how the relations affect *news outputs* and, as a result, how citizens understand society and politics. The adversarial-exchange line has been the most frequent interpretive framework when it comes to journalist-source relations. Research has therefore focused substantially on the important issues of power and control between journalists and their sources, and how shifting relations have been reflected in news outputs. Politicians seek

favourable media coverage by trying to manage reporters. This objective clashes with 'fourth estate' professional norms and liberal pluralist studies of journalists that see them acting in the public interests, and stresses the need for journalist autonomy in order to hold those in power to account (e.g. Van Aelst & Aalberg 2011; Price 2005; Lloyd 2004).

This can be linked to those who Schudson (2011) calls 'parajournalists', individuals who try and manage the information on display in the media, such as political 'spin doctors'. He illustrates that news is highly dependent on legitimate public sources, 'usually highly placed government officials and a relatively small number of reliable experts' (p. 47). The news media's reliance on elite government sources has been covered in numerous national studies, as well as comparative work (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014). The focus on a narrow group of elite sources has, therefore, led to criticism that the media is not adequately fulfilling its pluralist role by showing a range of perspectives.

Elite consensus or disagreements can be seen as important regarding the parameters of political debates. Using the example of US foreign policy on Nicaragua, Bennett (1990) illustrated that when political elites were in broad agreement, the coverage reflected that and mainly illustrated the elite consensus. However, when this consensus broke down, the press presented more pluralist views from outside the elite bubble to reflect the differences. At its core, Bennett's 'indexing hypothesis' predicts that news content on political and public policy issues will generally follow the parameters of elite debate. So when political elites are in general agreement on an issue, the news coverage will tend to reflect that, but when political elites disagree, the coverage will fall mostly within the parameters of the elite disagreement.

Due to the media's reliance on high level government sources, many have argued that in the tango dance Gans introduced, the sources have the upper hand (e.g. Strömbäck & Nord 2006). As Gans (1980, p. 116) himself stated: 'Although it takes two to tango, either sources or journalists can lead, but more often than not, sources do the leading.' The idea is that the realm of politics has in essence

superimposed itself upon the realm of media (Corner & Pels 2003). Official elite sources gain a status as 'primary definers' in the sense that they hold the power, define the relationship and the news agenda by controlling the flow of, and access to, information (Hall et al. 1978).

These established arguments focusing on how elite sources are dominant and can often 'lead the tango' contradict to some degree the more recent work on mediatization and media logic, which emphasises how the media's 'needs' can 'control' political sources. As Palmer (2000) emphasises, source behaviour is subject to various filtering norms of journalistic interpretation and selection and pre-planned 'pseudo-events' are often specifically created to cater to news outlets. Although it is true that journalists are dependent on sources, it is also true that sources are dependent on journalists, 'in that source desire to obtain publicity through news media can only be realized in so far as the event and/or the message disseminated by the source are in conformity with news values' (p. 12).

As the previous discussion on resource constraints illustrated, however, it can also be argued that the tough working conditions of journalists can result in sources gaining more power. To revert back to the discussion on PR as an information subsidy, Davis (2002) points out that the post-war expansion of the public relations industry, employed mostly by powerful sources, and tougher working conditions for journalists, has resulted in sources gaining more control. By looking at the resources available, it can be argued 'that while journalists continue to act with a high degree of conscious autonomy, that autonomy is subject to resource constraints' (p. 41).

Put simply, it has proven difficult to provide a definitive answer as to which side is more in control. Another strand of research highlights how journalist-source relations need to be examined from a more nuanced perspective than the adversarial-exchange line and the investigation of pluralist source conflicts suggest. Berkowitz (2009) illustrates that the relations are always lying between symbiosis, where both parties gain by giving something to each other, and an

adversarial relationship. Practically, the association also depends on different factors like gender, ethnicity, technology, media convergence and so on. The relationship is not static but constantly under negotiation; it is co-determining and interactive.

The limitations of many of the elite studies previously carried out, focusing on the relationship between journalists and their political sources, is that they are either examining the broad picture through the use of quantitative questionnaires (e.g. Van Dalen & Van Aelst 2014; Eriksson & Östman 2013; Brants et al. 2010; Van Aelst et al. 2010), or mainly examining media content (e.g. Mellado & Rafter 2014). They therefore fail to explore the cases in-depth by talking to the journalists and politicians at the centre of their studies. As Birkner (2015) notes, there is a lack of knowledge concerning the actual interactions of journalists and politicians, and we know very little about politicians and their media preferences. As Van Aelst and Aalberg (2011) point out, there are not many studies available that have simultaneously questioned politicians and journalists on the national level about their actual interactions and mutual perceptions, with notable exceptions (e.g. Johansson & Nygren 2019; Maurer & Beiler 2018; Davis 2010; Davis 2009; Strömbäck & Nord 2006).

In one such study, Davis (2010) examined the relations between politicians and political reporters in the United Kingdom by interviewing political journalists and politicians in Westminster. His research showed that political journalists play a key role in the political process and actively contribute to the social construction of politics itself. Davis found that in addition to seeking publicity, politicians talk to journalists in order to influence political agendas, convey messages to others and obtain multiple forms of information. 'These include knowledge about party rivals and opponents, political moods and points of consensus, and shifting levels of support for political factions and policies. Journalists, consciously or not, have come to play a role in the politics of politics itself' (Davis 2010, p. 68). As Van Aelst and Aalberg (2011) argue, this type of actor-centred study is important to understand what is really going on between

the two groups, and it is, moreover, helpful to study them both simultaneously since their relationship is highly interconnected.

Related to the previous discussion on media logic, Davis (2010) illustrates that many of the MPs he interviewed felt that they could easily guess future headlines and how certain topics would be framed. 'They appeared to have an extensive knowledge of specific publications, reporter routines and news values. Conversely, political journalists had an extensive knowledge of how Westminster, the parties and individual politicians operated' (p. 77). Politicians interviewed admitted that they often talked to journalists to get information about their own political party, the government, or Westminster politics more generally. Davis argues that relations between political journalists and politicians have become intense, institutionalised, and reflexive, as both sides now incorporate the other within everyday decision-making and thinking. The picture is, therefore, more complicated than the adversarial-exchange line and the investigation of pluralist-source conflict would suggest. Journalists now act as political sources and intermediaries, and the qualitative research presented by Davis seems to suggest that media logic might, to a certain extent, be dictating the behaviour of politicians, their relations with journalists, and, consequently, political coverage and politics itself.

Expanding journalist-politician relations in a small state social ecology setting
The more nuanced approach to politician-journalist relations, illustrating how they are interactive, co-determining, and reflexive, is focused on examining these relations within private spheres like Westminster. This is where the professional closeness between the two sides has been studied, and this has raised various questions, such as how the closeness in this closed off setting could possibly impair journalists' independence and make it more difficult for them to hold those in power to account (e.g. Van Aelst & Aalberg 2011; Gaber 2009). The environment in which politicians and journalists interact can be described as a 'microcosm' (Schudson 2008), emphasising the extent to which their lives intertwine within these private spheres. Recent analysis on how journalists have become active in politics itself is founded on the assumption that the interactions

between journalists and politicians take place in these types of settings (e.g. Kunelius & Reunanen 2012).

This leads to my first intervention into existing journalist-politician debates. I argue that the private sphere framework needs to be reformulated and expanded in order to be applicable to studying the Icelandic case. The idea of politicians and journalists constantly communicating with each other in a private sphere bubble is problematic in a small state setting due to the blurring of boundaries between public and private networks. As shown later in the thesis, the journalists are not present in the Icelandic parliament to the extent they are in Westminster. And the difference is also very stark when compared to the Nordic countries. For example, according to Dindler (2015), there were 180 journalists who had parliament as their work base in Denmark at the time of her study, and she found, similarly to Davis (2010), that journalists indirectly influence politics via the exchange of political intelligence with political actors.

There is currently only *one journalist* who has the Iceland parliament as her work base. What impact might this have on journalist-politician relations in Iceland? Where are the journalists getting their information on politics if they are not based in the parliament? Can they be active participants in the social construction of politics if they are not in the parliament to informally gain access to information there? How and where do they communicate and interact with Icelandic politicians?

A comparative study conducted by Van Aelst and Aalberg (2011) reveals further differences in comparison to Iceland. They conducted a survey amongst political journalists and members of parliament in Belgium, Norway and Sweden. These countries would all be defined as small states in the international relations literature outlined in the previous chapter. The authors argue that it is important to focus on the intimate nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists because their interactions are not guided by institutions or formal rules. One of the key findings of the study was that the relationship is in fact more formal than informal. A minority would meet someone from the other side for

lunch at least once a month, a minority considers members of the other group as friends and only a very small minority asks the other side for advice about work.

The politician-journalist relationship in Iceland illustrates much more informality and blurred boundaries between the two groups, and the parliament site itself plays a very limited role in the relations between the two sides. Related to this, the term 'political journalist' used in most of these comparative studies, as well as single case studies in the other Nordic countries (e.g. Väliverronen 2018), cannot easily be applied to the Icelandic case. The working conditions in Iceland mean that journalists need to be highly mobile generalists who can seldom focus mainly on reporting on politics. As will be shown later in the thesis, this cannot be understood without taking into account the small size of the society and the media market.

Size is an important variable, but it has not been highlighted much when it comes to the working practices of politicians and journalists on the national level. Örnebring and Lauk (2010) show that comparative studies of journalism pay virtually no attention to the relative size of the journalistic population, even though population size could well be an important variable. Furthermore, they illustrate that the small state approach in media studies has thus far been confined to the policy level (citing the work of Puppis (2009) discussed in chapter 2), despite the fact that many factors that have an impact on media policy can also impact the socio-cultural characteristics of journalists and other media workers. Their study on Estonian journalists showed that the shortage of resources for producing news content immediately influences the distribution of tasks in the editorial office, the personal duties of each journalist and how journalists work. The scarcity of resources forces the journalists too often to work at their desks without leaving editorial offices and this, in turn, increases their dependence on a limited number of sources.

Research in larger states has also shown that journalists increasingly work at their desk and communicate less with their sources directly than before (e.g. Lee-Wright et al. 2012; Phillips 2010), but much smaller staff numbers means that

this is only intensified in the smaller states. The small job market means that there is a shortage of journalists with specialist competences – and also little demand. When resources are scarce, generalists are more useful to employers. Örnebring and Lauk's (2010) research illustrates that there is relatively little specialisation among Estonian journalists: 63% of them sometime work on stories outside their specialist area, while nearly a third do this at least weekly, if not more often. The latter is true for only about 15% of UK journalists and 19% Swedish journalists, according to their study.

There are fewer sources as well, and fewer politicians, fewer business leaders, and so on. Although the population of Estonia is roughly four times the size of Iceland (The World Factbook 2019d), it is much closer to its population than, for example, the other Nordic countries. The subsequent analysis highlights how the smallness of the Icelandic society impacts the working conditions of journalists and politicians, and how and where they interact with each other.

Research on municipal officials and journalists in the Nordic countries shares certain similarities with the findings presented on the Icelandic case in subsequent chapters. This leads to a discussion later in the thesis concerning the extent to which the findings found on the national level in Iceland could therefore be explored on the more local levels in other countries. In his comparative study of seven towns and municipalities in Sweden (one of which had a larger population than the whole of Iceland), Larsson (2002) found that journalists and politicians knew each other very well and some had been associated with each other for a long time. Moreover, the study revealed a lack of journalistic initiative. This was linked to difficult working conditions for journalists that seldom allowed independent inquiry and agenda-building. Larsson argues that journalism with 'less active journalists, where information from official sources is distributed with little or no editorial interference, can certainly be regarded as a professional problem–and a democratic problem' (p. 31). This will similarly be highlighted on the national level in Iceland.

In a recent study of Austrian political journalists and politicians, Maurer and Beiler (2018) discuss previous research focusing on the relationship between journalists and politicians on the local level. They argue that familiarity, friendliness, and other results are probably due to the fact that the interactions were analysed on the municipal level rather than the national level. Following this they state: 'At the national level, where there is a larger number of actors, where journalistic professionalism is stronger, and where actors tend to know each other for a shorter time, other mechanisms of influence in the interactions may exist' (p. 4). The assumption appears to be that states are large and share certain structures and characteristics. What about the national level in smaller states?

In sum, the first intervention into existing journalist-politician debates is based on the fact that boundaries are more blurred in small states like Iceland, and that politicians and journalists therefore do not interact as much within private sphere networks as they do in the larger states. I argue that the relationship needs to be understood in a more expansive way in relation to the small state ecology outlined in the previous chapter.

This expansion leads to the second intervention, concerning the lack of attention paid to the role of the public in journalist-politician relations (e.g. Eriksson & Östman 2013; Van Aelst et al. 2010). When the public is discussed in the literature, it is commonly in relation to how the *content* derived from the relationship between politicians and journalists has an impact on public attitudes (Brants et al. 2010). As Davis (2007) acknowledges, in studies on elites and self-referencing networks that are made up of journalists, editors, political elites, communication staff, and various interest group representatives, 'the public is either simply imagined or excluded from consideration altogether' (p. 73). I argue that the public cannot simply be ignored as is done in much of the existing literature. Since there is less distance between elites and the public in a small state like Iceland, new lines of investigation open up concerning who sets the agenda and what impact this might have on political communication dynamics.

Following the examination of the journalist-source relations literature outlined in this section, it is apparent that there are two significant differences (alongside various similarities) when studying interactions between politicians and journalists in a small state like Iceland, compared to larger democracies. This leads to questions that need to be raised and answered. First, if politicians and journalists are not primarily communicating with each other within private sphere parliamentary bubbles, then how and where do they communicate with each other? What defines their relations? And second, since boundaries are blurred, how do journalists and politicians interact with the public? How does this impact political debates and dissemination? This is where the internet plays a key role.

3.4. The democratic potential of the internet

This section builds on the previous discussion and expands it to the online arena. To many, the internet provided a possible new avenue to fulfil the democratic roles of the media. Much of the early literature on the internet was highly positive when it came to its democratic potential, and this was frequently contrasted to the older top-down legacy news media (e.g. Curran 2016). Of particular relevance here are the arguments that the internet would engender open and public democratic *participation* through online channels, and that it could increase the public's *access* to democratic representatives.

This 'techno-optimist' argument has been routinely criticised by more 'techno-pessimist' views, as well as by empirical research. It has, for example, been argued that it is impossible to examine the internet outside of existing power structures within societies. Many people do not have access to the internet, and mainly educated and well-off groups in society engage with political issues online. Moreover, it has been shown that politicians mostly communicate in a one-way 'broadcast style' online, and that little interaction takes place between elected officials and the public (e.g. Jungherr 2016). The overarching argument is that the distance and lack of engagement that exists between politicians and the

public offline is also apparent online. Societies are unequal, large and complex and, the reasoning goes, the internet cannot escape this.

This section makes an intervention into these established debates in two key ways. First, it shows that the literature has missed a particular type of case, which opens up new areas of investigation. Iceland is an ideal case to counter the more pessimist perspective. It is much more equal in comparison to the larger western democracies usually studied, political engagement is high, as is the level of education, and internet usage is virtually 100% (Eurostat 2019; OECD 2017). Furthermore, the country is very small, and there is much more closeness between elites and the public there than in larger states. In other words, Iceland is, to an extent, the opposite of the larger states usually studied. Following the 'offline and online structures are similar' argument, it can therefore be argued that if there is a particular case where the internet can truly work as a type of digital public sphere when it comes to *participation* and *access*, then Iceland is it.

Second, the Icelandic case illustrates that too much emphasis has been placed on the *public* aspect of online engagement. I argue that it is necessary to introduce a new type of online public-private dichotomy framework in order to understand the different elements of political engagement that exist in what I define as a 'two-level online sphere'.

The internet enhances democracy?
As Curran (2016) illustrates, in the 1990s it was predicted that the internet would change the world. It would, for example, revolutionise the organisation of business, empower the weak and the marginal, it would shrink the universe and foster global understanding and, as relevant to the discussion here, it would rejuvenate democracy. These arguments were mainly inferences from the technology. 'Underlying these predictions was a widely shared internet-centrism, a belief that the internet was a determining technology that would reconfigure all environments' (p. 1). The internet's many-to-many communication ecology was seen to have positive effects on the media and journalism. As Fenton (2010b) points out, since the mid-1990s, there have been various studies that explore the

implications of the internet for journalistic practice. A majority of them have found that it brings new ways of collecting information and reporting. It is argued that this new type of journalism lacks editorial control, is open to novices, can stem from anywhere, with new ways of writing for networks with fragmented audiences. Also, it 'is delivered at great speed, and is open and iterative. In this manner the technology of the internet is said to have reinvigorated democracy' (p. 6).

More recently, the focus turned to how social networking sites (SNSs) like Facebook and Twitter have the potential to reinvigorate democracy. This was before the much more negative discussion concerning 'fake news', misinformation, and disinformation became more prominent in the literature, particularly following the Brexit referendum and the 2016 presidential election in the United States (e.g. Corner 2017; Allcott & Gentzkow 2017). It can be argued that social media has improved our ability to share information, act together, and communicate. These sites are different from the top-down, one-to-many technology of legacy media outlets that have been linked to the 'breakdown literature' discussed previously in the chapter. This is because social networking sites enable many-to-many open interactions. As Shirky (2008) writes: 'To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others' (p. 172).

Social networking sites are claimed to break down barriers between traditionally public and private spheres of communication. The boundaries between public and private spaces can be blurred and rearranged in the 'virtual geographies' on these sites (Papacharissi 2009b). Furthermore, it can be argued that social networking sites have broken down barriers *between politicians and citizens,* and that it is now much easier for politicians to communicate directly with the general public (e.g. Larsson 2016; Bruns & Highfield 2013). This can be seen to enhance democracy. As Theocharis et al. (2016) point out, from a normative point of view, engaging in dialogue has been seen as the most desirable and revolutionary aspect of the internet. This has been contrasted to the broadcasting style of the older legacy media. One of the most well-documented causes for citizen's disconnection from politics is the view that they have no say in political affairs

because there is little dialogue and discussion with the politicians, and because politicians do not listen. 'The possibility of two-way interaction between citizens and political actors is, thus, seen as a major step towards re-establishing democratic accountability and facilitating public participation' (p. 1011).

The argument that two-way interaction can be seen to 'open up' the democratic discussion between politicians and citizens can be linked to the 'equalisation hypothesis'. This implies that the existing power elites' dominance has been maintained by their easier access to the top-down legacy media. The hypothesis is that the internet has allowed political actors, including new and smaller political parties, to bypass the traditional media and speak to voters in a more direct manner (Lilleker et al. 2011). In other words, it levels the playing field and increases engagement. Relating this back to the democratic roles of the media, the internet, and social networking sites in particular, are seen as facilitating *open public debates* and making it easier for people to talk *directly* to their representatives, and vice versa. If there are open channels for all to see and participate in, surely it makes it easier to hold those in power to account?

The techno-optimist argument, often linked to possibilities of increased democratic engagement, has been heavily criticised for being naïve and for not taking into account the structures of 'actually existing democracies' (Fraser 1992). The argument against the internet being a democratic enhancer is commonly discussed in relation to wider societal inequalities. This can be linked to the 'normalisation hypothesis', which focuses on how 'patterns of socioeconomic and political relationships on-line come to resemble those of the real world.' (Margolis et al. 1999, p. 26; see also e.g. Koc-Michalska et al. 2016; Lilleker et al. 2011; D'Alessio 1997). Put simply, existing power relations are present online in a similar way as they are offline.

As Fenton (2016, p. 166) writes in relation to social networks and new media: 'We would be wise to remember that the wider social contexts in which networks are formed and exist have a political architecture that predates the internet.' Research has, for example, shown that the use of social media for political

participation correlates with education and social class. Those who are more educated and of a higher social class are more likely to be politically active online than those less educated and from a lower social class. Also, political interest and offline engagement with political issues has been shown to be linked to more political activity online (e.g. Wojcik & Hughes 2019; Boulianne 2015; Blank & Groselj 2014; Smith 2013; Gustafsson 2012). Furthermore, access to the internet is much higher in richer countries than the developing world, and there are also digital divides within rich Western democracies (e.g. Fuchs 2014). It is difficult to argue that the internet plays a key democratic role for all citizens in countries where access to it is limited.

Broadcast style or two-way interaction?
The idea that the internet would inaugurate a new era of direct two-way democratic engagement has been criticised in other ways. It is not just a question of privileged access and structural inequalities. The internet has the *potential* to increase communication *between politicians and citizens* (e.g. Theocharis et al. 2016; Chadwick 2006), but what does research on this actually reveal?

Most of the academic interest related to this has, in recent years, focused on social media, and, in particular, Twitter rather than Facebook (for an overview see Jungherr 2016). What most of the empirical studies on Twitter have found is that politicians interact infrequently with other users. Politicians are quite conservative when using Twitter and tend to adopt a one-way 'broadcasting style' (e.g. Graham et al. 2013; Jackson & Lilleker 2011; Glassman et al. 2010). Much of the overall social media and digital research has revealed a status quo in online campaigning since 'politicians mostly replicated traditional messages and campaign modes on their Web presences while limiting engagement with users' (Stier et al. 2018, p. 51). This therefore, again, suggests a much stronger case for the normalisation hypothesis as opposed to the democratic two-way argument. Research has shown that a few politicians draw most of the attention on social media, whilst the majority draw very little attention (Nielsen & Vaccari 2013). Again, this shows the existing power structures of elite sources as dominant, strengthening the normalisation argument, rather than the equalisation

hypothesis. Moreover, empirical work done on how political parties and municipalities use social media has indicated support for the normalisation hypothesis (e.g. Larsson 2013; Klinger 2013).

There is little evidence of Twitter being an enabling device for dialogue between citizens (Jungherr 2016, p. 78). Studies have shown that it is often simply an echo chamber for political elites (Larsson & Moe 2013), and politicians mainly engage with other politicians, journalists and activists (Bruns & Highfield 2013). The more limited research on Facebook seems to mirror Twitter results. For example, Nielsen and Vaccari (2013) found that the kind of direct candidate-to-voter communication that many academics studying digital politics have highlighted as possible remains exactly that—possible, but not something that actually happens on a large scale.

Many authors acknowledge that empirical work in this field lacks coherence and comparative research. Some recent studies have, for example, shown that interaction between candidates and voters might be evolving on social media and becoming to some extent more two-way and inclusive, but much more research on this is needed (Larsson & Skogerbø 2018; Tromble 2018; Graham et al. 2016; Enli & Skogerbø 2013). Moreover, most of the social media research relies on public digital trace data (Jungherr 2016), and it has been pointed out that more in-depth qualitative research is needed (e.g. Larsson & Kalsnes 2014). It should not come as a surprise that most of the research on this topic relies on publicly available data. As Dennis (2019) points out, the methodological orthodoxy of social media research 'emphasises publicly observable interactions' (p. 180). This leads to important blind spots in existing research, as I highlight subsequently.

Another limitation of most of the studies focused on social media and politics is that they are mainly conducted around elections (Stier et al. 2018). What takes place between elections? How are politicians using social media during this period? Are they interacting with the public? And, how does social media affect their relationship with journalists? A study of the social media usage of

Norwegian and Swedish politicians between elections found that use levels were quite low for both Facebook and Twitter (Larsson & Kalsnes 2014). One important point to highlight in relation to this study is that it focused on Facebook pages rather than personal profiles, and this is an important distinction, as will be illustrated in subsequent chapters in relation to the Icelandic case.

In another study, Gustafsson (2015) interviewed Swedish politicians about their daily social media routines outside of election periods, and found that many Swedish parliamentarians have Facebook profiles with a mix of old classmates, friends, and family, as well as political contacts, journalists and citizens in general. In his study, Gustafsson discusses the differences between the United States and Sweden and points out that the Facebook strategy of politicians in the larger country seems to be more professionalised and business-like than of those in Sweden. This should not come as a surprise, since the Facebook behaviour of political actors needs to be studied by taking into account the different structures these political actors are operating in. This can, again, be linked to the normalisation argument. Other studies have highlighted that the political context and the culture of digital media use in particular countries has been shown to influence how politicians use social media (Tromble 2018; Graham et al. 2016; Anstead & Chadwick 2009).

A two-level online sphere: Establishing a different online public-private dichotomy
The empirical results from Iceland presented later in the thesis illustrate how social media, mostly Facebook, plays a key role not only in the relationship *between politicians and the public,* but moreover in the highly personalised relationship *between politicians and journalists.* To revert back to a recent study that examined the relationship between political journalists and politicians in Austria, Maurer and Beiler (2018) discuss the multitude of online and offline message channels available when it comes to contemporary political communication. Interestingly their study found that offline communication was still the predominant form of communication. As they state: 'It appears that online communication is a distinct and marginal form of direct communication in political journalism as far as personal interactions are concerned. Along these

lines, Twitter and WhatsApp communications were mentioned only very sparsely in the open interviews' (Maurer & Beiler 2018, p. 7).

The Icelandic case differs significantly from these findings. As will be illustrated in relation to the small state ecology, offline communication is very common, including in unofficial settings such as in the swimming pool or the supermarket, but the research also revealed that much of the highly personalised communication between journalists and politicians takes place online, on Facebook profiles and pages but mostly more *privately* on Facebook Messenger, the mobile instant messaging service (often referred to more simply as a 'messaging app') on Facebook. Moreover, it will be revealed how the public is actively involved. Two-way online interactions are also apparent *between politicians and the public*, and they routinely take place in the more private settings, which have mostly been ignored by orthodox social media research, since it emphasises public interactions (Dennis 2019), as previously mentioned.

The 2018 Reuters Digital News Report revealed that, whilst still substantial, the use of Facebook for news consumption is slowly declining. However, at the same time, the use of messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger (both owned by Facebook), for news, is increasing. The report found, for example, that Facebook is more likely to be used for discovering news, whilst messaging apps are more likely to be used to take part in a private discussion about news, or to take part in a group chat that was set up specifically to discuss a news topic. Focus groups conducted in the United States, United Kingdom, Brazil and Germany highlighted that 'use of social networks and messaging apps for news is not mutually exclusive. Respondents often talked about coming across news via Facebook or Twitter, but then posting it on WhatsApp when they wanted a discussion or debate' (Newman et al. 2018, p. 52). In other words, the news was *discovered* in the more public setting, but then *discussed* more privately in the messaging apps.

The report found that privacy is an important issue for users, and this partly explains the growth in the use of messaging apps for news. This was true for the

more authoritarian countries, but people are also increasingly turning to these apps in the non-authoritarian states. One reason is that they do not always feel comfortable in expressing their political views in front of their friends, acquaintances and family (Newman et al. 2018, pp. 52–53). In other words, there is a certain amount of self-censorship in the more public settings, resulting in less engagement. The engagement increasingly takes place in what people typically perceive as more private settings. This engagement would be missed using the orthodox way of researching social media through publicly observable behaviour and interactions, such as tweets, retweets and hashtags on Twitter, as well as status updates, comments and news sharing on Facebook.

Dennis (2019) examined the routine social media use of 29 digitally active citizens through their personalised diary data, as well as interviews and participant behaviour collected from Facebook and Twitter. To his surprise, he found that a majority of those who described themselves as politically engaged could be classified as 'listeners', or those 'consuming political information from Facebook and Twitter but refraining from public forms of expression' (p. 195). He found that these people adopted semi-public and private forms of communication, such as WhatsApp for political talk. Dennis argues that more individual-level research needs to be conducted that describes and explains these media habits. The importance of these messaging apps in citizen engagement has begun to draw more scholarly attention recently (Vaccari & Valeriani 2018; Valeriani & Vaccari 2018).

As mentioned earlier, it has been argued that social media breaks down, to some extent, the distinction between the public and private. Various personal or private moments can become more public when people post about them on the social networking sites. Here I argue that it is, in fact, the public-private dichotomy that is key to understanding political engagement online. I argue that it is necessary to establish a framework based on differences between the public and private, as it relates to online interactions.

The emerging research on the more private behaviour online is mostly focused on examining how citizens are communicating with each other – *not* engagement between elites and the public. Small states, as defined in the previous chapter, are absent from this vast literature. This is not just evident by their absence but also in various underlying assumptions made by authors studying interactions between politicians and the public. For example, Tromble (2018) states that citizens do not necessarily expect a response from politicians on social media when reacting to their posts. She argues that this is because people 'are used to top-down communication, and though they may desire reciprocity – even believe it warranted – they are unlikely to expect it from politicians' (p. 681).

Linking this to the normalisation hypothesis, it should be the case that the small state social ecology, outlined in chapter 2, will be present online as well as offline. This suggests that there should be more blurred boundaries and intense interactions between elites and the public in Iceland than previous research from the larger states finds. If the Icelandic public is used to interactions with elites offline, why should people not expect politicians to respond to their comments online?

Much of the critique aimed at Habermas's work outlined earlier in the chapter has focused on the fact that a unified public sphere cannot exist in contemporary large representative 'actually existing democracies' (Fraser 1992). The reasoning is often focused on the fact that these countries are large and fragmented, and it is therefore difficult for wide and inclusive participation and deliberation to occur. The dynamics of democracy in small states counter this to some extent. Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) illustrate in their comparative study of 39 small states that in (actually existing) small state democracies, it is much easier for politicians and the electorate to communicate in two-way interactions because of an enlarged public sphere that can exist in smaller communities. Which leads to the question: What can this mean for a small state with the highest internet penetration rates in the world?

The Icelandic case problematises the argument that a public sphere cannot exist online because of lack of access and fragmentation. Iceland has been shown to be the only country in the world with 100% internet penetration and according to the most recent figures from Eurostat, Iceland has the highest percentage of internet use in Europe. Ninety-nine per cent of Icelanders between the ages of 16 to 74 *use* the internet regularly. Moreover, 93% of Icelanders *use* Facebook regularly (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2018).

In contrast to the existing literature that highlights pre-existing socio-economic structures inhibiting the internet's democratic potential, it can be argued that Iceland is an ideal case to illustrate if the internet can enhance democracy and contribute to the creation of a digital public sphere. Access to the internet is virtually 100%, equality is high, the population is highly educated (OECD 2017), and the smallness of the society results in much less fragmentation than found in the larger societies. And, as discussed in the previous chapter, party membership is comparatively high, as is turnout in elections. This is an important point to stress since political activities offline have been shown to have an influence on political activities online (e.g. Gustafsson 2012), which again can be linked to the normalisation argument.

It was highlighted at the start of this section that the intervention here would focus on how the Icelandic case is, to some extent, the opposite of the larger states previously studied, and that this opens up new avenues of investigation. Offline structures and relationships are not unequal and distant, but rather much more equal and close. Following the 'offline and online structures are similar' argument, it can therefore be argued that, if there is a particular case where the internet can truly work as a type of digital public sphere when it comes to *participation* and *access*, then Iceland is it.

The second intervention complicates this picture. It focuses on the fact that much interaction takes place between journalists and politicians in *private* on Facebook Messenger, and, moreover, that the public also participates in this type of interaction. I show how online behaviour in Iceland can be defined in terms of a

'two-level online sphere', with one level being more public, the other more private. Even an ideal setting for a digital political public sphere like Iceland does not result in much participation from citizens *in public*. What might this tell us about the internet's democratic potential for enhancing an open and public dialogue accessible to all?

Conclusions

The three theoretical frameworks for the following three empirical chapters have now been outlined. The democratic roles of the news media serve as a normative reference point for the subsequent analysis. When my research started, the frameworks were devised in relation to research gaps on Iceland. Perceptions on the routine legacy media coverage of politics had not been explored in the country. Neither had the working relationship between journalists and politicians, nor the democratic public sphere potential of the internet in relation to political communication.

The 'gap filling' research soon turned into expanding and re-energising existing political communication debates. It became clear that the Icelandic case is different from the large and medium sized western democracies that have dominated political communication scholarship. This presents an opportunity to show how existing frameworks can be complimented with additional information from the small state of Iceland. The subsequent chapters follow up on this in relation to the frameworks outlined in this chapter, the scene setting information in the previous chapter, and the original empirical material.

The three frameworks are interlinked and will be used as a roadmap for the following examination. The focus on the breakdown of the legacy media in chapter 5 sets up a structural framework for the subsequent analysis in the other two empirical chapters. The breakdown as it relates to political coverage has resulted in fundamental changes in the relationship between journalists and politicians. This has now become increasingly distant on a professional level. This further complicates an already complicated, multi-layered relationship (as chapter 6 examines). The breakdown has, moreover, resulted in the legacy media

being seen as less important than it used to be in relation to political coverage and debates. Much of this has now moved online, which again is complicated in a small state because of issues related to closeness and blurred boundaries (as illustrated in chapter 7). Before this examination begins, the focus turns to the data collection and methods used to carry out the research.

CHAPTER 4:
Methods and data collection

This chapter describes the mixed methods used in my study and outlines the data collection that took place in Iceland between two parliamentary elections, from November 2016 to September 2017. As illustrated in the previous chapter, my research stages interventions into three interlinked areas of study. This is in relation to filling the research gaps outlined in the introduction of the thesis. The first gap concerns how Icelanders perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media. The second gap is the relationship between journalists, politicians and the public and how this impacts political coverage. And the third under-researched area is the role social networking sites play in interactions between politicians, journalists and the public, as well as in the political coverage in the legacy media.

These research gaps were used to formulate broad and explorative research questions. The questions are, moreover, used to guide the academic interventions set out in the previous chapter. They are as follows:

Research gap: Routine political coverage in the legacy media
1) How do journalists and politicians in Iceland perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy news media and how is this seen to affect their working practices? (Qualitative)
2) How does the public perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy news media? (Quantitative)

Research gap: The relationship between politicians and journalists (and the public)
3) What is the nature of the relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland? (Qualitative)
4) What is the nature of the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland? (Qualitative and quantitative)

Research gap: The impact of social networking sites on political coverage and the interactions between politicians, journalists and the public

5) How are social networking sites perceived to have impacted routine political coverage and interactions between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland? (Qualitative and quantitative)

The questions informed the methodological approach outlined in the present chapter. The chapter is in three main sections. The first section explains why I chose to use both quantitative and qualitative methods for the research. The reason for choosing a mixed methods approach can be linked to the two different groups studied: politicians and journalists on the one hand, and the public on the other. I go on to explain how my research merges two types of mixed methods research designs.

The second section discusses the qualitative data collection. It illustrates how I conducted and analysed 25 semi-structured interviews with Icelandic politicians and 25 semi-structured interviews with journalists who cover politics. I discuss the limitations of this research and how my previous work as a journalist informed this part of the study and my access to interviewees.

The third section of the chapter discusses the quantitative data collection. A survey was sent out to 2000 respondents (representative sample of the Icelandic population) through the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Iceland. A total of 1264 people answered the survey, resulting in a 63% response rate. As discussed in the chapter, the aim with this quantitative part of the study was to triangulate the data regarding *perceptions*, but moreover to explore to what extent the public *interacts* with journalists and politicians. Finally, I discuss limitations with this part of the research.

4.1. Mixed methods research

The research carried out relies on a 'mixed methods' approach, since it entails both quantitative and qualitative elements. Mixed methods research is, in simple

terms, based on the premise that the two paradigms associated with quantitative and qualitative methods are not incompatible. As Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2007, p. 123) define it, this type of research 'combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g. use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration.'

Quantitative and qualitative methods both have their strengths and weaknesses and the researcher should therefore use the methods likely to give the best answers to particular research questions. As Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) argue, mixed methods research provides strengths that can offset the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research. For example, one could argue that quantitative research is weak in understanding the context in which people talk and the voices of participants are not directly heard. Furthermore, quantitative researchers are in the background and their own biases and interpretations are seldom discussed. Qualitative research, on the other hand, can be seen as limited because of the personal interpretations made by the researcher, the ensuing bias possibly created by this and the difficulty in generalising findings to a large group because of the limited number of participants studied. 'Thus, the combination of strengths of one approach makes up for the weaknesses of the other approach' (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011, p. 12).

It is important for the researcher to explain why a particular study is suited for a mixed methods approach. This is linked to the research questions being asked in the study. Are mixed methods the best way to solve a particular research problem? As O'Cathain et al. (2007) explain, the purpose of using a mixed methods approach does not need to be particularly complex. One can simply illustrate that different methods are complementary and address different aspects of the research being carried out. This is the case in my study.

As outlined previously, this thesis investigates political communication in the *small state* of Iceland. One of the differences between studying small as opposed

to larger states is the blurred boundaries between elites and the public. As I discussed in the previous two chapters, it is difficult to separate politicians, journalists and the public into separate spheres in the Icelandic case. Because of the socio-cultural closeness (where 'everybody knows everybody'), these three groups can be deeply connected when it comes to the dissemination of political information in the public sphere in Iceland. The reason for choosing a mixed methods approach can simply be linked to these areas of connectivity between the different groups studied. Studying them together allows for a more complete picture to emerge than if I had limited myself to a narrower group of individuals. Which leads to the questions: Why did I decide to use different types of methods for these groups? Why not just use the same method for all of them?

Quantitative methods are well suited for examining the public because they offer the possibility of using a representative sample to give insights into the perceptions and interactions of the entire population. Qualitative research is unable to do this. Since the journalists and politicians being investigated are, as a whole, a much smaller group than in larger states, it should be possible to qualitatively interview a proportionally large sample of the overall population. In practice this proved feasible since access to politicians and journalists was not a problem. The interviews enabled a wider ranging and more in-depth qualitative analysis of both journalists and politicians than would have been possible in a larger state because of size and access. In subsequent chapters, I illustrate how the use of these two types of research methods offers complementary insights into the dynamics of political communication in Iceland. Public perceptions are rarely examined alongside qualitative interviews with both journalists and politicians in the same study, as is done here.

Overall, Iceland can be viewed as the case being studied. 'The most common use of the term 'case' associates the case study with a location, such as a community or organization. The emphasis tends to be upon an intensive examination of the setting' (Bryman 2012, p. 67). The case study design is often criticised for being too broad and less rigorous than other forms of research. This is not surprising, since it can be argued that case study research is not really a methodology, but

rather it is the choice of what is being studied (Stake 2005). One can use various techniques and units of analysis to examine a particular case. By concentrating on a particular phenomenon, community, individual, or institution, the researcher aims to uncover the manifest interaction of significant factors characteristic of the case in question. 'But in addition, the researcher is able to capture various nuances, patterns, and more latent elements that other research approaches might overlook' (Berg 2009, p. 318).

As Bryman (2012) points out, case studies are often associated with qualitative methods. He illustrates, however, that these types of studies are in fact frequently sites for the employment of both qualitative and quantitative research. The research conducted for the thesis can be defined as an 'instrumental case study'. With this type of study the intention is not simply to describe and understand the particular case being examined but rather to 'help the researcher better understand some external theoretical questions, issue, or problem' (Berg 2009, p. 326). The aim is not only to understand particular aspects of the dynamics of political communication in Iceland but moreover to produce research findings from this small state that will contribute to larger theoretical debates concerning small and large states, and underlying assumptions in the political communication discipline.

The research design used has its foundation in two of the major mixed methods research designs, the convergent parallel design and the explanatory sequential design. The design chosen for a particular study needs to reflect interaction, priority, timing, and the mixing of data. The convergent parallel design occurs when the researcher uses concurrent timing to implement the quantitative and qualitative strands during the same phase of the research process. The data is then analysed separately and the results are merged when they are compared or related and interpreted (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011). All the data collection took place from November 2016 to September 2017 in Iceland. The data was collected and analysed separately to an extent, as illustrated in the following sections.

The study, however, also differs from this design. The qualitative data collection took much longer than the quantitative part. Since this was an explorative study, I decided that it would be beneficial to conduct and analyse a selected number of interviews before finalising the survey questions. This way, the survey could be based on the relevant theoretical debates, as well as themes from the qualitative data. I expected that this might be helpful since the interviewees would most likely give some answers that had not been anticipated based on the existing literature. This was in fact the case and it was possible to incorporate these inductive themes into the survey after conducting and analysing just under half of the interviews. It is expensive to administer a quantitative survey of this scale and it could therefore only be carried out once. It was thus important to have as much information as possible before finalising the questions. This way of conducting parts of the qualitative data collection and analysis prior to the quantitative part is more similar to the exploratory qualitative sequential design which begins, prioritises and finishes the qualitative part before conducting a second quantitative part to test or generalise the initial findings (Creswell & Plano Clark 2011).

This design is, however, also somewhat different from the research carried out here since the aim was not explicitly to test or generalise the initial findings. The focus was on examining different groups in the qualitative and quantitative parts, not to test the same groups using different types of methods. Moreover, the qualitative part was not finished before the quantitative research was started. The design can therefore be seen as a type of hybrid between the convergent parallel design and the exploratory sequential design. It resulted in the same phenomena being studied using different sources (groups) and different methods. This is often defined in terms of data triangulation. The purpose of triangulation is not necessarily to cross-validate data, but simply to capture different dimensions of the same phenomena and thereby increase the depth of knowledge about it (Patton 1999). The triangulation emerged in particular regarding the *perceptions* from the three groups concerning legacy media coverage of politics, the politician-journalist relationship and online political communication, as illustrated later in the thesis.

Including the public added depth and scope to my findings regarding people's perceptions, but moreover I argue that it is important to include the public when examining *interactions* between the three groups, since citizens are active participants alongside politicians and journalists in political communication dissemination in the public sphere in Iceland. This is, to an extent, different to what studies from larger democracies have shown, as illustrated in subsequent chapters. Ignoring the public, as is routinely done when examining journalists and politicians in political communication research (e.g. Brants et al. 2010; Van Aelst et al. 2010), would mean missing out on important aspects of political communication dynamics in Iceland. Boundaries are blurred between politicians, journalists and the public, and this is a fundamental aspect in understanding the media and politics ecology of the country.

Put simply, I decided to use two different types of methods because they are useful in exploring the perceptions of the different groups under examination, and how they interact with each other. Quantitative methods are suitable in examining the public since they offer the opportunity to use a representative sample to give insights into the perceptions and interactions of the overall population in Iceland. Qualitative methods are fitting in exploring the views of journalists and politicians, as the next section discusses in more detail.

4.2. Qualitative data collection: Semi-structured interviews with politicians and journalists in Iceland

For the qualitative part of the study, interviews were conducted with Icelandic politicians and journalists who cover politics to some extent. The interview was chosen as the method for this part since it is a useful mean of access in understanding the perceptions of participants (Taylor & Bogdan 1998, p. 110). As illustrated, the research questions aimed at the politicians and journalists were focused on how they perceive political coverage in the legacy media, the nature of their relationship with the 'other side', perceptions concerning how social networking sites have impacted political coverage, and offline and online interactions with the public. The interviews enabled an analysis of all these areas.

The overall population of politicians and journalists in Iceland is quite small, so it would have been challenging to conduct quantitative analysis for this part of the research. This type of analysis often requires a bigger sample size than possible here to provide valid tests, such as the chi-square test used on the public sample. One of the key differences between studying a small state and a larger state in a thesis like this is that, in a smaller setting, it is possible to gain access to most, if not all, individuals and networks that are under investigation. This enables a much wider and encompassing study than would be possible for researchers investigating larger states. Access to politicians and journalists was not a problem and this enabled the collection of in-depth and rich data from both of these elite groups.

For this part of the study, a 'purposive sample' was used. 'The principle of selection in purposive sampling is the researcher's judgement as to typicality or interest. A sample is built up which enables the researcher to satisfy their specific needs in a project' (Robson 2011, p. 275). Here the need was for a cross-section of both groups and the sample was created based on this criterion. As Taylor and Bogdan (1998, p. 93) argue, the researcher should generally vary the type of people chosen until he has uncovered a broad range within the group being studied.

The type of interview that was conducted in all 50 instances is defined as 'semi-structured'. This type of interview can be located somewhere in between the extremes of the completely structured and unstructured interviews. Semi-structured interviews involve the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics. However, 'the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress; that is, the interviewers are permitted (in fact, expected) to probe far beyond the answers to their prepared standardized questions' (Berg 2009, p. 107). Furthermore, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009, p. 134) point out, it is useful for the interviewer to 'clarify the meanings relevant to the project during the interview. Such attempts at disambiguation of interviewee's statements will provide a more secure ground for the later analysis.'

The semi-structured interview proved to be a useful method for the qualitative part of the study. As outlined, this was an explorative study with broad research questions. All interviewees were asked the same overall open questions, which were constructed based on the three research gaps and the interventions outlined in the previous chapter. The interview frame is included as appendix 1. For example, regarding the perceptions of the political coverage in the legacy media, all interviewees were simply asked: 'How does the Icelandic media cover politics?' I did not define terms such as politics for the interviewees and instead let their perceptions guide their answers.

I was not quantitatively testing a representative sample and it was therefore not necessary to have a completely standardised questionnaire in this part of the study. The interview frame allowed me the flexibility to ask each interviewee thoroughly about their own experience regarding the topic and to probe in relation to specific answers. The aim was to interview a broad spectrum of both of the groups to get a clear sense of the overall perceptions. The result was 50 interviews, 25 with politicians and 25 with journalists.

After conducting and analysing 21 interviews, there was a break in the interview process in the spring of 2017 whilst the focus was on finalising the quantitative questionnaire. Subsequently, an additional 29 interviews were conducted. By this point it was clear that data saturation had been reached with both the politicians and the journalists since interviewees were repeating answers and themes that had been analysed in the prior interviews. I therefore decided to stop after 50 interviews. Based on previous qualitative analysis I have conducted, I had initially estimated that between 40 and 60 interviews would most likely be a sufficient number for the two groups. It is difficult to know beforehand exactly how many interviews will be needed for a particular study. When additional interviews stop yielding further insights, saturation has been reached and the interviews can be concluded (Taylor & Bogdan 1998, p. 93).

First, with regard to the politicians, I interviewed 25 sitting MPs from all political parties represented in the Icelandic parliament (Alþingi) at the time. This

included 5 of the 11 government ministers. I decided to focus on current politicians rather than former ones since the study examines contemporary political communication dynamics. All of the interviews with the politicians took place after the parliamentary election in October 2016, and they were concluded before new elections took place in later October 2017, after the government collapsed in September 2017. As discussed in chapter 2, there are 63 MPs in the Icelandic parliament and during the interview period there were 7 political parties represented: The Independence Party (21 MPs), the Progressive Party (8 MPs), the Social Democratic Alliance (3 MPs), the Left Green Movement (10 MPs), the Pirate Party (10 MPs), the Reform Party (7 MPs), and Bright Future (4 MPs). The government at the time was a centre-right coalition between the Independence Party, the Reform Party and Bright Future.

The purposive sample (25 of the 63 MPs) was chosen carefully to include MPs from all parties, and it was proportionally based on party representation in the parliament. This led to around half of the MPs from each party being interviewed. Furthermore, the sample included a mixture of younger and older MPs, the gender balance was almost equal (13 female MPs and 12 male MPs were interviewed), as was the case in the parliament at the time, and there was a balance between MPs from the Reykjavík area and the constituencies outside of the city.

The MPs were initially contacted directly via email. The only exceptions to this were the government ministers, whose political advisors were contacted directly. The email briefly explained the research and included information about myself, my advisor and informed consent. The email finally asked if the politicians would be willing to be interviewed for the study. Most of the MPs and political advisors answered this initial email but follow-up emails were sent to those who did not respond and most MPs agreed to be interviewed. Furthermore, I used Facebook Messenger to send follow up messages if MPs and government ministers did not respond to emails and this led to additional confirmations via email (as will discussed in subsequent chapters, Facebook Messenger is a key tool in political communication in Iceland). Several MPs and ministers apologised through

Facebook Messenger for not having answered emails and mentioned that they receive a large amount of emails every day (or that their advisors do) and that it is difficult to keep up with everything. In total, only two MPs declined to be interviewed, both because of time constraints. The sample was adjusted accordingly.

All of the interviews with MPs took place in their offices close to the parliamentary building in Reykjavík or in meeting rooms in the building itself. The interviews with government ministers took place in their offices in the ministries. The interviews were quite informal despite being conducted in these places. Nowhere was it necessary to go through any type of security and on several occasions the interviewees offered to get coffee and other refreshments for the PhD student about to interview them. This was even the case with some of the government ministers. As discussed later in the thesis, most Icelandic MPs do not have any members of staff and they therefore were usually the first point of contact when arriving at their offices and would sometimes request to meet outside the office before going inside. Even though the interviews with the government ministers were set up through their political advisors (after I had sometimes sent the ministers a message on Facebook Messenger if the advisors had not responded), the advisors were not present during any of the interviews and none of them requested any additional information prior to the interviews. The informality of the online communication and the interview settings illustrates well the small state aspects of the political communication ecology outlined in subsequent chapters.

Very few journalists in Iceland write exclusively or even mostly about politics, but a larger number focus to some extent on political issues. The criteria for being included in the sample for the journalist group was that the interviewees were at the time employed as journalists and/or editors and sometimes covered political issues. The reason for including the 'editor' profession here is that some of them also worked as journalists at the time. As with the MPs, the focus was on current rather than former journalists and editors since I was studying the contemporary landscape. The sample was carefully chosen to reflect a mixture of younger and

more senior journalists at the main media outlets in Iceland that cover politics. Here the gender ratio was tilted towards men since they seem to be in the majority when it comes to covering politics. This is similar to other countries. For example, in a recent comparative study on political journalists, Albæk et al. (2014, p. 39) found that over 'two-thirds of British, Danish and German political journalists are male.'

In all, 16 male journalists and 9 female journalists were interviewed from the following media outlets (the outlets were introduced in more detail in chapter 2): *RÚV* (the Icelandic PBS), *Stöð 2* (privately owned television station*), Morgunblaðið* (privately owned subscription newspaper*), Fréttablaðið* (privately owned free paper*), DV* (privately owned subscription newspaper), *Viðskiptablaðið* (privately owned subscription business newspaper*), mbl.is* (the website owned by the same publishers as *Morgunblaðið*), *vísir.is* (the website owned at the time by the same publishers as *Fréttablaðið*), *Kjarninn* and *Stundin.* The last two are smaller outlets started by journalists following the financial crisis. The former is online whilst the latter is also published in print.

Several of the interviews took place in offices and meeting rooms in the newsrooms whilst the journalists were at work, but others took place in meeting rooms at the University of Iceland (where I was based whilst conducting the fieldwork) when the journalists were off work. Like the politicians, the journalists were contacted via email and follow up emails were sent as well as messages via Facebook Messenger. All of the interviewees contacted were willing to be interviewed apart from one journalist who said no because of time constraints. Again, all the interviews were quite informal and took place during the same time period as the interviews with the MPs.

All 50 interviews were conducted in Icelandic and were recorded and transcribed in full by myself. Most interviews were around one-hour long, with the shortest being 50 minutes and the longest two hours. Analytical memos were written during the early analysis stage, first when 5 interviews with each group had been conducted and again when 10 interviews had been conducted with the journalists

and 11 with the politicians. Writing these memos proved helpful in identifying key themes that were explored further and added to the quantitative questionnaire for the public. I initially coded the interviews using the open coding approach and the software NVivo and subsequently used axial coding. This is a useful coding technique since it reassembles the data the researcher has fractured during initial coding and gives coherence to the analysis (Charmaz 2006). The key themes that emerged are explored in chapters 5, 6 and 7. All the quotes used in the thesis in relation to the themes have been translated from Icelandic to English by myself.

Most of the politicians and journalists appeared to be keen to be interviewed and expressed much interest in the study. It is often discussed in relation to interviewing elites that the biggest challenge is gaining access to the people the researcher wants to interview and this process can take months and sometimes even years (e.g. Harvey 2010). Access was not a problem in the small state of Iceland. As mentioned, emails and Facebook Messenger were utilised to easily gain access to enough interviewees for the study.

The key issue regarding access here is probably linked to my nationality and previous experience. I worked as a journalist in Iceland, from 2000-2001 (on a television station called *Skjár Einn*) and again from 2005-2007 (at *Morgunblaðið* and *RÚV*). I know several journalists and politicians in Iceland and could mention my previous experience in journalism when requesting interviews. This background undoubtedly helped with my credibility and gaining the trust of those being interviewed. This was mentioned several times at the start of the interviews by the interviewees. My former employment as a journalist played a part in my initial interest in the topic of this thesis and it helped me in understanding the context, since I have worked in newsrooms before and interviewed politicians on television, on the radio and in print. My experience dates back to the pre-crisis era. Much has changed since then, but it helped overall in my understanding of the topic.

Several interviewees mentioned at the start of our correspondence that they were only willing to be interviewed if their answers were anonymised. I had anticipated this, and decided before the interviews started to offer anonymity to all those being interviewed. This is common when interviewing people in small states (e.g. Corbett & Veenendaal 2018; Randma 2001). It is difficult to be 'on the record' saying something regarding someone you might meet in the shop or the swimming pool the next day. The anonymity was highlighted in relevant ethics forms submitted to the University of London and the Icelandic Data Protection Authority. The interviewees and myself all signed an informed consent form. I kept one copy and the interviewees another copy.[31] No names are used in the thesis when using quotes, since they are all representative of many similar answers that were recorded in numerous interviews. It can therefore be argued that it does not matter from whom the original quote comes. It would have been impossible to get as much information as is the case here if names had been used. This became clear when talking to the interviewees. They were unwilling to discuss many topics without anonymity. A list of when the interviews took place, along with the broad job titles of the people interviewed, is included as appendix 2.

Like all methods, the interview has its limitations. It cannot be assumed that the interviewees will tell the interviewer everything they are thinking or feeling about the topic being discussed. Moreover, there is always a danger of a social desirability bias. This means that the interviewees answer in a way that makes them look good and/or in a way that they think the researcher is looking for. This did not appear to be much of a problem in this study. Most of the interviewees seemed to relax early on and started to answer in ways that did not always make them look or sound good, as the following chapters illustrate. They were often critical of themselves, as well as other politicians and journalists.

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[31] Most interviewees requested anonymity in general but agreed that specific 'non-controversial' quotes could be used with their name if the quotes were sent to them beforehand for their approval. In the end, I did not end up using any names since the quotes are all representative of similar answers in other interviews.

The questions were carefully designed to not lead the interviewees in one way or another. Subsequent probing questions were used to get the journalists and politicians to clarify their answers, which can be seen as one of the strengths of the semi-structured interview process, as previously discussed. It is important to emphasise here that the idea with the interviews is to get a sense of how politicians and journalists *perceive* the issues they were asked about. Their answers are not taken at face value (interviewees for example often contradicted themselves in the interviews) but rather their viewpoints are evaluated in the context of the interview as a whole and in relation to the other interviews.

As mentioned, I know some of the people I interviewed. Moreover, I know people who know other interviewees. As a result, it is clearly difficult for me to escape from the socio-cultural 'everybody knows everybody' aspect I discuss in the thesis. I attempted to work around this by having the questions as open as possible and to not discuss my opinions on the topics with the interviewees. I did not give people I knew any further information than those I did not know beforehand. It is my perception that the anonymity was very helpful in allowing people to speak freely, and people I did not know at all opened up very quickly, as did those I knew. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned the anonymity, and it seemed to me to allow them to relax and to talk about matters very openly, as highlighted in the following chapters. The focus now turns to how these frank discussions were combined with survey material.

4.3. Quantitative data collection: Surveying the Icelandic population

The quantitative part of the data collection consisted of a panel survey administered through the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) at the University of Iceland. In this type of survey 'the participants in the sample are selected as being representative of some larger group, known as the population (this can be an actual population, say the people living in a town), or any group such as the workers in a factory' (Robson 2011, p. 258).

As previously outlined, the survey participants are representative of the Icelandic adult population. Randomised selection and techniques for assuring representation across all subgroups were utilised (Groves et al. 2004). The SSRI has in recent years been building its own representative online panel and this was used for the survey. The online panel consists of Icelandic residents aged 18 and older who have agreed to participate in the SSRI's online surveys. Panel members are recruited by telephone interviews with random samples from the National Register and care is given to rebalancing when needed. Therefore, samples drawn from the online panel are representative of the Icelandic nation.

When developing a survey of this kind, the researcher needs to be cautious with regard to reliability and validity. For example, if the questions are incomprehensible or ambiguous, the survey is clearly a waste of time and money. It is considered to be a problem of internal validity when we are not obtaining valid information about the respondents and their views. If the sampling is faulty, this produces an external validity problem (or generalisability). 'Reliability is more straightforward. By presenting all respondents with the same standardized questions, carefully worded after piloting, it is possible to obtain high reliability of response' (Robson 2011, p. 258). The questionnaire was sent out to an initial pilot group of 50 people and the wording in certain questions was amended after this. I asked the pilot group to answer the questions and provide feedback if something was unclear. Several questions were deemed as confusing and this was rectified following the feedback.

The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions in Icelandic, most of them with answers on a five-point Likert scale. Furthermore, several of the questions consisted of statements that respondents were asked to agree or disagree with, to one extent or another. A translated version of the questionnaire is included as appendix 3. As was the case with the qualitative part of my research, the survey was constructed based on the research gaps and the interventions outlined in the previous chapter. Emphasis was placed on asking about perceptions concerning media coverage of politics, the relationship and interactions with journalists and politicians, and the impact social networking sites have had. As mentioned,

interview answers uncovered additional themes that were added to the survey questions. This included, for example, the more 'informal' communication on Facebook, as shown in chapter 7.

Most questions and statements in the survey were devised to explore to what extent the public agreed or disagreed with the journalists and politicians. Sometimes the statement was the opposite of the interviewee perceptions. For example, interviewees mentioned that Icelandic media outlets do not conduct enough investigative work. The statement in the questionnaire was the opposite of this: 'The Icelandic media generally conducts enough investigative work when it covers politics in Iceland.' This was done on purpose to prevent getting an acquiescence bias in the answers, that is, a response bias where respondents have a tendency to agree with all the questions (Baron-Epel et al. 2010). Aside from the triangulation concerning the public's perceptions, the survey also asked about the connectivity and interactions between journalists, politicians and the public. As shown later, interviewees for example discussed how the public directly contacts them online and offline, and through the survey it was possible to gauge how common this practice is.

In addition to the 25 questions, there were standard questions from the SSRI, focusing on age, income, gender, political views and education. Apart from the standard questions, I devised all the questions in the survey in Icelandic and have translated them to English for the analysis in subsequent chapters. As stated, the questions were based on the relevant theoretical and empirical literature set out in the previous chapters, as well as international surveys and themes from the first 21 semi-structured interviews. The relevant questions will be introduced in subsequent chapters in relation to the comparison with the qualitative material.

The survey was sent out to 2000 respondents via email on 30 May 2017 using the SSRI's online system Qualtrics. The email included a short introductory text about the survey. Based on previous surveys at the SSRI, the aim was for a response rate of 55-60%. Since the questionnaire was quite long (it took on average around 20 minutes to answer it according to the Qualtrics system), it was predicted that the

response rate would perhaps be a bit lower than this. However, the response rate exceeded the most positive predictions and ended up being just over 63%. A total of 1264 people answered the survey after three reminder emails had been sent.

Following this, I received the raw anonymised data from the SSRI and analysed it using the software SPSS. I used descriptive statistics when examining particular survey answers in relation to the qualitative interview answer. They are included in tables, and in text where relevant, alongside the pertinent questions. A couple of concepts examined (media logic and the watchdog role of the media) can be related to underlying latent variables. I used exploratory factor analysis (EFA) when I examined the data related to these variables. I used this advanced method since it can find underlying patterns and structure (factors) in the data. This is particularly useful when examining concepts that are measured using several observable variables. In addition, I used a chi-square test to analyse the statistical differences between groups in the online political communication ecology, as outlined in chapter 7. I did this because demographic variables are routinely used in the relevant literature on the internet. The detailed calculations for the differences between groups can be found in appendix 4.

As is the case with the interviews, the survey data has various limitations. The answers are more superficial than interview answers since there is no possibility for further probing, and they were not worded in an open way as the interview questions were. They can, therefore, simply give an idea of some the overall broad perceptions in Iceland. I argue that this can also be the strength of this material. It can illustrate to what extent the in-depth information from the interviews is representative of the wider perceptions in society, as well as give a fuller picture of the interactions that take place between journalists, politicians and the public.

Conclusions

This chapter outlined the mixed methods used and the data collection that took place in Iceland for my study. As the following chapters show, the qualitative material provides an in-depth look into the perceptions and interactions between

politicians and journalists, and the survey material illustrates that the views of the public appear to echo, to a large degree, the views expressed in the interviews. These two types of research methods offer complementary insights into the dynamics of political communication in Iceland. As mentioned earlier, public perceptions are rarely examined alongside qualitative interviews with both journalists and politicians in the same study, as is done here. This results in a highly data-rich description of the Icelandic case.

I am not exploring the actual media content that the people are referring to, but rather their perceptions concerning it. As mentioned in the introduction of the thesis, the focus here is on understanding the dissemination of political information in relation to the ideal democratic roles of the media. An important aspect of this is to understand how people *perceive* the information they have access to. This can be seen to inform their understanding of politics. Later I discuss how this research could be followed by further research, including more content focused analysis. I argue that the investigation presented here was a logical starting point for the under-researched case of Iceland. The interviews and survey material uncovered new areas of study concerning 'private' content and informal interactions that would have been missed if the study had simply been focused on publicly available content. Before discussing this in more detail in chapter 6 and 7, the focus now turns to examining perceptions concerning the political coverage 'out in the open' in the Icelandic legacy media.

CHAPTER 5:
Breaking down –
How a vulnerable small state legacy media covers politics

This chapter addresses the breakdown of the legacy news media in Iceland and how it is perceived to impact political coverage. This is evaluated in relation to the media's democratic roles of holding those in power to account, staging an open and public debate on important issues, and representing the people (Curran 2002). The exploration is guided by two of the broad research questions set out earlier. The first focuses on *how journalists and politicians in Iceland perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy news media and how the coverage is seen to affect their working practices*. The second question highlights *how the public in Iceland perceives the political coverage*. Perceptions of routine political coverage in the Icelandic media have not been studied before. The chapter fills this research gap and shows how the Icelandic case can be situated within the wider literature on the crisis of the news media.

The traditional funding model of the commercial legacy news media has been breaking down, and there is now a crisis in the business model of news (Phillips & Witschge 2012), as discussed in chapter 3. It is a crisis not of demand but of funding, which, ultimately, has an impact on content. The difficulties of news production had been illustrated in larger states prior to the global financial crisis (e.g. Davis 2002; Franklin 1997), but the crisis exacerbated the problem. Many studies illustrate a news media in crisis (e.g. Siles & Boczkowski 2012; McChesney & Pickard 2011), with journalists finding it increasingly difficult to produce in-depth political coverage based on original reporting.

Since Iceland is one of the five Nordic countries, one would expect Iceland to be in a somewhat better position to tackle the crisis of the news media than many other countries. This is because the Nordic states have been defined in relation to the tradition of the welfare state and democratic corporatism, and these characteristics are also apparent in the Nordic media landscape. These rich states have supported public and private outlets more than many other states (Syvertsen et al. 2014).

The Icelandic media market differs somewhat from the markets in the other Nordic countries. Iceland has been routinely overlooked in the political communication literature, and is often simply defined as a 'Nordic model' alongside the four states, even though Icelandic authorities have, up until now, not supported private media as has been done in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland (Ahva et al. 2017). Corporatism is less developed in Iceland, and state involvement has been limited to *RÚV*, the public broadcasting service. In addition, as has also been addressed before, Iceland is much smaller than the other four states, with around 360,000 people living in Iceland (Statistics Iceland 2019), compared to over 5 million in Norway, the second least populated Nordic country (The World Factbook 2019b). This mix of smallness and a mainly commercial media market can lead to more superficial and problematic political coverage in Iceland than in the more frequently studied larger states, as shown in this chapter.

The chapter is in three main sections. The first section focuses on how politicians and journalists perceive political coverage in the legacy media in Iceland. The interview answers revealed striking similarities concerning the coverage in general terms. It is seen as superficial, lacking in analysis and informed criticism. This was often compared to coverage in larger states, which was perceived as problematic as well, but also more diverse. The interviews moreover revealed how politicians adapt their behaviour to suit the superficial needs of the media.

The second section illustrates public perceptions, which echo those of politicians and journalists to a large degree. Political coverage is regarded as superficial, lacking in critical questions and investigative work. The third and final section then discusses the perceived reasons behind the superficial coverage. By far the most dominant theme was focused on *resource constraints and commercialisation*, linked to the *small media market*, echoing the structural peculiarities of small media markets outlined by Puppis (2009). Fewer and less experienced journalists are producing more material than ever before, and this leads to more superficiality in the coverage. The financial crisis made a weak media market even weaker in terms of funding and resources.

The chapter uses relevant material from the 50 interviews with Icelandic journalists and politicians. The themes presented in the following sections were found to be dominant in the interviews. Moreover, questions from the representative survey sent to 2000 Icelanders (response rate 63%) are used to compare public perceptions to those of journalists and politicians.

5.1. Political coverage as perceived by Icelandic politicians and journalists

This section examines how journalists and politicians perceive routine political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media. Since the study was explorative, I emphasised the investigation of perceptions relating to the media in general terms, with open questions. Specific examples of news topics and media outlets were often mentioned in the answers and are included where relevant. In most cases, it did not appear difficult for the interviewees to generalise about the small media market. First, the views of the journalists will be illustrated before moving to the politicians.

Journalists: Superficiality, events, government ministers and parliament
All interviewees were asked the following open question: 'How does the Icelandic media cover politics?' Over 90% of the answers from the journalists were along similar lines. Whilst stating that there are sometimes exceptions to this, journalists perceive the coverage overall to be 'superficial' and 'shallow'. Linked to this, answers focused on a 'lack of analysis and criticism', 'reactive coverage' and too much focus on simplistic 'she said/he said statements'. As one journalist (interview 4) put it:

> The coverage is too superficial. Something happens and you often just rush to get a quote. What does this politician say about this? You get the views of the politicians and they can often get away with saying whatever they like. You get one politician saying one thing and then you find another one that says the opposite. Sometimes they say things that simply are not true and get away with it because we usually do not have time to fact check what they say.

Another journalist (interview 10) said similarly:

> The coverage is too superficial. There is not enough analysis of the various systems that matter in Iceland. It is easy to distract with the talking heads coverage we have. The truth does not necessarily matter in this coverage and this contributes to a lack of criticism.

Around one third of the journalists also mentioned, in relation to this superficiality theme, that Icelandic journalists are often 'too polite' when interviewing politicians. This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter since it relates to the power dynamics of the relationship between politicians and journalists, which is examined there.[32] This deference is perceived to impact political coverage and the journalists' watchdog role.

Over two thirds of the journalists stated that certain outlets and journalists sometimes cover politics in-depth with informed criticism and analysis, but the overall consensus was that the coverage *in general* is too superficial. This was the case with journalists working at the private outlets as well as *RÚV*. Usually when I asked the initial open question, the journalists went straight into generalising about the media outlets overall without hesitating. The exceptions concerning certain outlets and specific journalists often came as follow-up answers.

In relation to the superficiality theme, interviewees mentioned repeatedly that Icelandic political coverage is heavily 'event-based', even more so than in larger states. They contrasted outlets in larger European countries to the Icelandic market. In the larger states, the media is also often focused on events, but, at the same time, it also initiates coverage. According to the journalists, the initiative for political stories seldom comes from the Icelandic journalists and outlets

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[32] As one journalist (interview 22) put it: 'The media outlets of course differ but in general there is too much focus on what this person says, and that person says, and then the story is over. We often do not follow up with critical questions and analysis. I think we are too polite when we interview politicians and let them lead the conversation too much.' Another journalist (interview 36) said similarly: 'The coverage is quite superficial at most media outlets There is too much politeness, I think. Politicians were used to being treated too well by the media before the crisis. They often react badly when they are criticised, and it seems to me that they feel like they are being picked on.'

themselves, but rather from pre-planned events that take place. The journalists then show up to cover these events, or, cover them from their desks, as is increasingly common. As one journalist (interview 6) put it:

> The coverage is very much event-based. Journalists often just go to these events and put a microphone in the politicians' face and get a sound bite without necessarily asking critical questions or analysing the topic. And they are not setting the agenda themselves but instead show up and cover what has been pre-planned by others.

Various examples were given of this, including government ministers signing some memorandum of understanding, opening a new school building or website, or when organisations introduce studies or reports that highlight issues they want to put on the agenda.

In relation to the above, a majority of the journalists stated that political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media is commonly focused on the Icelandic government. Ministers are often interviewed at the pre-planned events, where they can frame the issues the way they like. Moreover, they can sometimes disseminate them, to an extent, unfiltered via the journalists that come to interview them since the journalists often do not have time to prepare (and are frequently inexperienced as the next chapter illustrates). There is also much attention on the parliament. Apart from the ministers, most political interviews are with the leaders of political parties, those who are in charge of committees, and a few MPs who often say 'outrageous things', according to many journalists.

This focus on elite interviewees is not surprising, since many studies have shown that institutional sources, notably political elites, dominate as sources in political coverage (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014; Barnett & Gaber 2001). The journalists often discussed this in relation to the 'talking heads' or 'she said/he said' coverage. There is a lot of back and forth between elites in these political news stories, and they are often very negative and lacking in analysis and input from the journalists. These perceptions are somewhat different from studies from larger countries such as the United Kingdom that have shown an increasingly greater reliance on journalistic opinion and comment, enhancing the editorial power of journalists

through 'interpretive journalism' (Cushion 2015). As one of the journalists (interview 9) said:

> There is little focus on the issues themselves and the emphasis is instead placed on disagreements and arguments. This is probably not good for the political debate in the society more generally. The media helps to illustrate differences between the parties. Usually we interview ministers, leaders of the political parties and MPs in charge of the parliamentary groups for each party. And they give opposing views. And then I have around 10 or 12 MPs that I regularly talk to but do not necessarily interview on the record. Just to get a sense of what is going on.

Over 90% of the journalists mentioned that the main focus in political news reports in the Icelandic legacy media, particularly on television and online, is often on the heated debates that take place in parliamentary chamber at the start of the day. These take place in short segments that are called 'störf þingsins', 'fundarstjórn forseta' and 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir'. The first two provide MPs the opportunity to give short 'sound bite friendly' speeches, usually delivered specifically for the media, according to the journalists. The third slot, 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir', gives MPs the opportunity to ask ministers anything they like, and again, this is often delivered specifically for the media, as perceived by the journalists. As one (interview 2) said:

> Some members of parliament seem to have realised that if they say outrageous things or are witty and clever they are more likely to be covered by the media. There is too much focus on arguments, shouting and bullshit. Those who are loudest often get the most attention.

Instead of talking about policy, the MPs often act a certain way in these segments they know will get attention in the media, according to most of the journalists. It suits the 'needs of the media'. And these needs were apparent in other answers. For example, one journalist (interview 3) who worked in television when interviewed mentioned that it is important that politicians know how the medium works. It is much easier to interview politicians that are 'good on television'. This saves a lot of time:

> These politicians know how to answer in ready-made sound bites, and it is therefore easier to edit them, takes less time and the story works better on television.

The interviewee discussed this in relation to having 3 or 4 other news stories that she would be working on at the same time. These answers reflect a perception from the journalists that the politicians know exactly what the media 'wants', and they deliver. This can be related back to the debate on media logic and Strömbäck's (2008) third phase of the mediatization of politics, which emphasises how politicians adapt their behaviour to suit the media's needs.

In contrast to the answers that focused on superficial coverage and lack of analysis, many journalists stated that the coverage in the media in the aftermath of the financial crisis in 2008 was more critical than it had been before the crisis. A majority argued that this had made it better, whilst slightly fewer interviewees felt that it had become too ruthless, often lacking informed criticism. The perception in many interviews was that the criticism presented in the media in the immediate aftermath of the crisis was not necessarily focused on policy debates, but rather that the media had allowed more critical voices to be heard.[33]

Put slightly differently, the newly critical coverage was not necessarily because the journalists themselves were becoming more discerning, but rather because attitudes in society were much more critical following the crisis, and this was reflected in the media. This can be linked back the theme of the 'event-based' coverage, but expanded to the societal level. Citizens, politicians, and various groups and organisations initiated more criticism, which was covered in the media. This was frequently linked to the fact that there is much less trust in politics and the media post-crisis, and this has been reflected in political coverage. Earlier it was shown for example how trust in the Icelandic parliament fell from 42% in early 2008 to only 13% one year later. And trust in the media was only 15% in 2009, shortly after the banks collapsed (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2009).

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[33] Some of the interviewees had not started working in the media when the crisis took place, so they were unable to offer a comparison between the coverage before and after the crisis.

The Icelandic media was heavily criticised following the crisis, and journalists simply had to 'step up their game', according to most of the journalists interviewed. Many of them stated that this was done partly by opening up to more voices, but also by certain journalists and outlets being more critical than they would have been before the crisis. Newer outlets, such as *Stundin* and *Kjarninn*, are often particularly critical and dig deep, according to many interviewees. The limitation with these two outlets is that they are much smaller than those who cover general news throughout the day, and therefore reach a much smaller audience (as shown in chapter 2) and need to focus on narrower topics than the larger private outlets and *RÚV*. As one of the more senior journalists (interview 48) reflected, these outlets perform well from time to time, but mainly in areas that they are specifically interested in covering. As he put it: 'This is often good work. But this is not representative of the media market overall.'

Almost all of the journalists said that the routine coverage *overall* as it relates to politics is moving back to a less critical pre-crisis mentality. Much has changed in the last few years. In relation to this, another of the more senior journalists (interview 46) reflected on the time shortly after the Icelandic banks had collapsed:

> This was a really interesting time. People were very interested in political issues and discussed them a lot. But the problem is that people just gradually sort of stopped taking part. The interest died down. But there were of course political parties that were formed following this, which are still around today, like the Pirate Party. I mean they became big because of distrust in politics, not because people were so interested in the internet, as was the case in many other countries. So much happened here after the crisis. We had the parliamentary report on why the banks collapsed, and people tried to change the constitution. People were always protesting. But then these things sort of went nowhere.

Even though many things have gone back to a more pre-crisis mentality, a majority of interviewees agreed that one specific aspect has drastically changed: trust in the media and politics is still much lower than it was before the crisis, and this has impacted political coverage. Regarding this more critical coverage post-

crisis, the importance of social media was noted (as will be further illustrated in chapter 7). As one of the journalists (interview 5) said:

> Yes, the crisis clearly had a big impact. The media was heavily criticised. Journalists are often more critical now than they used to be, but this is also linked to the fact that the public distrusts politicians and the media a lot more now compared to before the crisis. If people are unhappy with something that the media is doing, they will make themselves heard on social media. There is a lot of pressure on journalists from there. So the media overall, and individual journalists and politicians, cannot get away with what they did before.

In other words, this is linked to public participation and public attitudes, not just the journalists or politicians. At the same time, over 90% of the journalists stated that the crisis and its aftermath have, overall, *increased* the problematic, uncritical and superficial coverage. This was linked to developments in the media market. Following the crisis, media outlets have drastically shrunk in size and experienced journalists have moved to other jobs, and fewer (and less experienced) people are producing much more content than was the case prior to 2008. Guðmundsson (2016) found that the revenue of the five largest media companies almost halved between the years 2007 and 2009. The turnovers of the two largest media companies, *365 Media* and *Árvakur*, plummeted by 48-49%. Almost a third of the journalist population was laid off, among them many experienced journalists (Jóhannsdóttir 2015; Kolbeins 2012). This was both the case at the private outlets, and at public service broadcaster *RÚV*, where almost a third of all journalists were let go (Guðmundsson 2016).

Nearly all of the journalists interviewed said that there is far too much material produced in Iceland by too few journalists, which has led to increasingly superficial coverage. Most stated that the working conditions appear to be best at *RÚV*. Several of the journalists working there acknowledged this, whilst stating at the same time how much the newsroom has shrunk in recent years, leading to much more material produced by fewer journalists, and, inevitably, more superficiality as a result. The cuts in financing following the financial crisis have not been reversed.

A majority of the journalists linked the overall superficiality in political coverage to commercialisation and how media outlets are funded. Most emphasised how outlets have been struggling following the financial crisis. Many outlets are solely dependent on advertising income, including the free paper *Fréttablaðið,* which is the most read newspaper in Iceland. As discussed in chapter 2, the strong position of the free papers in the Icelandic media market is somewhat unique. In 2010, Iceland and Luxemburg were the only European countries where the penetration of free newspapers was higher than that of their paid-for counterparts (Bakker 2013; see also Karlsson 2009). As many interviewees noted, there is little incentive to be critical when your business model is built solely around advertising in a small society where 'everybody knows everybody'.

It was not the free papers, however, that received the most attention when discussing superficial coverage. A majority of the journalists mentioned that the shallow sound bite coverage is even more dominant on the online legacy news sites. A recent study appears to show a similar theme. Jóhannsdóttir (2018) examined the proportion of soft and hard news in *Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið*, as well as their accompanying online sites at the time. She found that the amount of soft news increased in both print and online versions from 2005 to 2013, but the increase was considerably more online.

One of the journalists (interview 32) stated succinctly, in relation to the online legacy sites: 'The internet is the weakest link. It is most vulnerable when it comes to the unfiltered news stories.' This was frequently linked to the fact that the main online legacy news sites in Iceland are reliant on web traffic and advertisements. What drives readership online is 'clicks', and what matters is to be the first with the stories. The online journalists I interviewed stated that, when they read the newspaper or watch the news on television, they often experience most news items as 'old news' since they have covered the issues on their sites much earlier, often the day before. This is how one of the online journalists (interview 33) explained the process of covering politics, mainly parliament, online in Iceland:

Usually just one of us covers the parliament for the day when it is in session. You follow it throughout the day on the screen in the office. There is a lot of emphasis put on 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir' and 'störf þingsins'. There is usually always something that comes from those two slots. And we often listen to special debates, but it takes too much time to listen to the longer debates. If I am watching one of the shorter debates, and I hear a really good quote, I try and type it up as fast as I possibly can and think that I need to be ahead of the other online sites. It is very important to be the first when you are online. It always amazes me how much the public is interested in these weird stories from the parliament that are not focused on the issues. Sometimes you are just like: What? Really? We can follow what is being read in real time.

This was echoed in other interviews with online journalists. The main emphasis was on being first with the stories, and constantly updating the websites with the latest material. This is similar to findings in other countries. As Mitchelstein and Boczkowski (2009) concluded in their review of research on online news media, journalists who work online appear to have institutionalised the practice of publishing new information constantly.

The online journalists stated that the Icelandic public is very often interested in stories from parliament that are not focused on the issues but rather arguments, outrageous statements, and so forth. They also mentioned that they observe negative attitudes towards the online news sites, both from the public but also from politicians and other journalists. People feel that they are not 'serious enough', and the online journalists often find that politicians prefer to be interviewed on television, the radio or in print. The perception is that the negativity towards the way politics is sometimes covered online is based on the fact that the focus is often on catchy headlines and arguments. The online journalists did agree that the coverage can be improved, but as one of them (interview 35) said, in response to this criticism:

Yes, maybe it is the case that the news stories online do not increase trust in parliament but at the end of the day it is the MPs that are behaving this way. We are not forcing them to speak like this and are not telling them what to do. And the public reads these stories. Can we really be solely blamed for this?

Returning to the discussion concerning the ideal democratic roles of the media in chapter 3, it is clear that the Icelandic journalists interviewed were concerned about the state of the Icelandic media overall as it relates to political coverage. When asked how they perceived their roles as journalists, there were two prominent answers that can be related back to the ideals. First, they saw themselves as detached watchdogs, and, second, as information disseminators. In other words, their job was to hold those in power to account and to present the most relevant and important information to the public. This stages a public debate from relevant angles, and an informed public can make up its mind as a result. When commenting on the state of journalism, and whether it was good or bad, the assessment was usually discussed in relation to these role perceptions.[34] In other words, this was the normative reference point in their answers.

Politicians: Overall agreement with the journalists but differing insights

Most of the 25 politicians interviewed did mention some positive aspects with regard to how the Icelandic legacy media routinely covers politics. MPs stated that journalists sometimes clearly come well prepared, and they have often been impressed by the overall quality of the questions being asked, particularly knowing the difficult working conditions of journalists. However, when asked the same open question as the journalists concerning how the Icelandic media covers politics, the overall consensus quickly became apparent. The coverage is often 'superficial' and 'shallow', and too focused on 'arguments', 'negativity', 'controversial statements' and 'catchy headlines'. Furthermore, the coverage is 'too reactive'. These descriptions were overwhelmingly negative in relation to the democratic roles of the media being a watchdog and staging a debate on important issues. And, significantly, politicians do not simply place the blame on the media and journalists.

A majority of MPs mentioned that much of the real work in the parliament is not really shown in the legacy media, such as the substantive work that takes place in the committees, and when MPs take part in policy debates. Instead,

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[34] This is similar to the findings on Icelandic journalists from the Worlds of Journalism survey (Ahva et al. 2017; Kolbeins 2017).

interviewees mentioned that the overarching focus is on heated debates and arguments that take place in the parliamentary chamber. This is mostly in the previously mentioned short slots at the beginning of the programme in the parliamentary chamber ('störf þingsins', 'fundarstjórn forseta' and 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir'), where MPs can give speeches on basically anything they like, and question ministers. And this is when most of the journalists pay attention, according to the MPs. As one politician (interview 12) stated, 'the juiciest parts' of the programme seem to be at the start, at least according to the news values of many of the journalists who cover parliament:

> So you see in the chamber that there are always a few television cameras there when the programme starts and they are filming for the first hour. Then they leave.

The way the programme for 'störf þingsins' (most often mentioned by the MPs in relation to this) works is that there are usually 15 slots available and MPs have to sign up at 8:00 in the morning for their slot. The segment normally lasts for half an hour and takes place twice a week. As one of the politicians (interview 16) stated, if you know what you are doing you can basically control the media coverage you will get. You are, in a way, writing the news story for the journalists beforehand:

> It is really easy to get yourself noticed in the media if you want to. The main thing is that, if you have something specific you want to get covered, then you go to 'störf þingsins', and you kind of need to be the first one. Because there are fifteen, and the journalist has maybe lost interest when it gets to thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. You understand? In those slots. So you need to wake up early (laughs) to get your slot. You read the papers to find out what is the story of the day, and maybe you try to find something catchy to say or if there is an opening to have an argument with some other MPs. You try to get that in there. And this really works.

A majority of the MPs were critical of the way in which some politicians use the slots simply to get on the news and were equally critical of the media for covering this. One of the MPs likened this to the Colosseum in Rome. In the parliament there are the opposition MPs and the government, and those who show up with the sharpest weapons and most eager to fight will 'win' and be covered on the

news as a result. The MP (interview 17) linked this to market-driven news values and politicians wanting to get noticed:

> You know there is a cumulative effect. The politician wants to be on the media to tell his voters what he is doing, and the journalist is of course happy when he sees something that is catchy because he wants his report to be read.

Over two thirds of the politicians mentioned that this type of political coverage is definitely not in the public interest, and does little to contribute to anything positive when it comes to informing people about important issues. One of the MPs (interview 14) explained that, following initial news reports that focus on this type of coverage, the MPs who manage to get themselves noticed are then sometimes asked to participate in current affairs shows on the radio and television to talk about the issue further. There, two or three MPs might be invited to debate for 10-20 minutes, and this is very often lacking in substance as well, since it is mainly following up on the argumentative 'for-show performance' from the politicians earlier in the day.

Many MPs, particularly the younger ones, mentioned that they felt under some pressure to perform for the media in order to get attention; to prove that they are actually showing up for work. If they are being productive, but more behind the scenes, they often get comments from the public asking them what they are doing at work, and if they are in fact working, since they do not appear to be doing much. And the media is often uninterested in the committees and policy work, or unable to cover these areas due to resource constraints. Therefore, in order to get noticed, and demonstrate to people that they are really showing up, it is sometimes necessary to play the game with the media; to give the media 'what it wants'. There is a sense that you need to understand how to think in 'click bait' type headlines. As one of the younger MPs (interview 18) said:

> Yes, the pressure, it is maybe indirect. That is, you do not really get noticed if you do not use certain, you know, unless you use big words. No one is telling you directly: 'Say something really juicy so that I can use it.' You know what I mean? But, you know, if you do not say something juicy, then of course I am not going to be using it. You understand? (laughs).

Several MPs from the opposition parties at the time of the interviews (the Pirate Party, the Left Green Movement, the Social Democratic Alliance, and the Progressive Party) highlighted that in order for them to be able to criticise the government, and get noticed doing it, they needed to participate in this game. This is particularly true as the media mainly interviews party leaders from the opposition parties, not regular MPs. Put simply, some MPs also *try* to use this platform to substantively criticise the government, since this is perceived as the main megaphone they have (aside from their Facebook profiles, as explored in chapter 7).

Whilst the politicians were very critical of the media in this regard, they acknowledged that MPs are also to blame. When giving these 'click bait' type speeches, the main purpose is often to get on the news, and no one is forcing the MPs to do this. Many seem to crave this type of attention, and these are often the MPs who are not particularly productive in the 'real work' that takes place behind the scenes. Interviewees argued that this cannot really be good for anyone in the long run, and discussed this in terms of the democratic roles of politicians and the media.

When giving a speech like this it is best to think like the journalist would, as several MPs illustrated. You create the headline yourself beforehand in your head and try to write the story for the journalist in the speech. Then it is ready made for the media to pick up. As one MP (interview 15) put it:

> We are not innocent, I mean MPs in general, not innocent because we are aware of this window that opens up, this little half an hour which is in fact open. To go up to the podium and just belt it out and grab a headline.

As was the case with the journalists' perceptions, these answers clearly illustrate that the politicians are supplying the media with 'what it wants'. Again, most of the answers can be linked to media logic and Strömbäck's (2008) third phase of mediatization, which highlights how politicians adapt their behaviour to suit the needs of the media. Politicians usually discussed this in relation to commercialisation and market-driven news values. That is, they showed an

awareness that it is 'necessary' to suit the superficial 'headline grabbing' needs of the media. This not only affects what the media covers, but also what types of speeches are given in parliament and so forth. In sum, it influences politics itself, not just the media coverage.

Similar to the journalists, the most common words used to describe political coverage in the Icelandic media were 'superficial' and 'shallow'. A majority of MPs compared the coverage to what they are familiar with in other countries, particularly in Europe (the United Kingdom and the Nordic countries were frequently mentioned). Most said that they follow various foreign news outlets, so they could easily compare the coverage between Iceland and the larger states. Over two thirds agreed that, although the political coverage can also be superficial overseas, there exists more in-depth coverage there alongside the more superficial material. The dominant perception was that coverage in Iceland is often highly random, and what is reported clearly depends, to an extent, on the interests of those journalists who are working on any given day, according to many of the MPs.[35] It was frequently mentioned that the media does not spend nearly enough time analysing important topics such as the yearly budget and the five-year budget plan put forth by the government. Instead, too much focus is spent on easier argumentative issues that do not matter nearly as much for society in the long run, such as whether to expand the sale of alcoholic beverages (which has been debated in the parliament annually but never approved).

According to a majority of the politicians, there is often little follow up on important news reports, and many said that they are under the impression that stories are sometimes discontinued the following day if a particular journalist who had been covering the story is not working then. As one of the older MPs (interview 29) said:

> The political coverage in Iceland is far too shallow in general. I sympathise with the media outlets because they are short staffed and struggling financially. The shallowness of the coverage is a weakness. It is superficial and based around catchy headlines. What is lacking is depth

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[35] This will also be discussed in more detail in the next chapter when discussing the lack of specialisation in the Icelandic media.

and investigative journalism, but there are, of course, exceptions and good reporting here and there. What is also bad is that there is not much stamina to continue with stories. There are many sad examples of important topics that have not been covered thoroughly. What I am describing here is of course not unique to Iceland, but it is much more exaggerated here. The media often stays away from covering big and complicated issues. They are seen as too abstract, I think. It is easier for the media to cover more narrow issues that are linked to particular groups who are vocal and have shown an interest in them and put them on the agenda.

A majority of MPs mentioned similar points. It is clear that they perceive journalists as usually working under immense pressure and not having time to work on their stories properly. The watchdog role, then, is often not really carried out by the journalists. Instead, special interest groups, 'opinion leaders', and members of the public put issues on the agenda, and they are frequently 'allowed' to say what they want in the news reports, somewhat unfiltered. There is often very little gatekeeping carried out and this was linked to the she said/he said coverage. One group says one thing, and someone from another group says the opposite. The journalist disseminates the material, and then the story is over. Commonly, the stories originate on Facebook, as discussed in chapter 7.

MPs were critical of this, and many said that it is important for the media to fact-check material in more detail before allowing it into their news reports. Linked to this, many MPs argued that it is difficult to separate big and important issues from less important news stories nowadays. Random points are covered, and many felt that important issues are often not put in context with what is happening in other countries. As one MP (interview 34) put it:

> Journalists need to be more critical of those who are critical. To fact check what the critics are saying. The debate is usually more focused on conflicts than solutions. Negativity gets more attention than positivity. There is so much noise that people stop being able to tell the difference between the real issues and the various details that do not matter as much.

This section has illustrated that Icelandic politicians and journalists have similar perceptions when it comes to the overall political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media. It is seen as superficial, shallow, and lacking in analysis and informed

criticism. There is much emphasis placed on sound bite friendly speeches, and politicians frequently adapt their behaviour to suit the needs of the media. This has an impact on politics itself. The coverage is often event-based, and outside groups can gain traction by initiating particular types of criticism and by putting issues on the agenda.

The findings here are, to an extent, similar to what has been found previously in larger states in relation to superficial coverage (e.g. Karidi 2018; Davies 2008). However, the situation is perceived to be escalated in Iceland because of the smallness of its commercialised media market. Most interviewees were easily able to generalise about the media market, and argued that there is a lack of variety on display. In larger states, there is also much homogeneity and superficial coverage according to most interviewees, but this is mixed with more specialised coverage and in-depth reporting. *RÚV* was often discussed in relation to the superficiality, although many also said it does a somewhat better job than the other outlets. It was the smaller outlets, *Kjarninn* and *Stundin,* which were most often described as more critical and in-depth than the rest, whilst it was a dominant view that the online legacy sites are the most superficial. Interviewees usually did not single out particular outlets but rather discussed the media market in general terms.

These perceptions are not surprising. As discussed earlier, the Icelandic press market has been unique in the sense that it has 'produced neither elite-oriented quality papers nor extremely populistic tabloids' (Karlsson 2004, p. 242). In a market as small as the Icelandic one, there is little room for readership segregation based on purchasing capacity and other socio-economic divisions. Thus, expecting much in-depth coverage is perhaps not realistic in this type of market, especially following a financial crisis that impacted funding and resources. Most media outlets do not focus on segments of the population that might have specialised interests, but rather cater to the public in this small media market. Which leads to the next question of the analysis: How does the public perceive the coverage?

5.2. Political coverage as perceived by the public

This section shows that there were clear similarities between interviewee perceptions and answers from the public. As outlined in chapter 4, the survey questions were devised from the relevant academic literature, as well as interview themes. The aim was to triangulate the data and explore comparisons between the perceptions of journalists, politicians and the public.[36] Respondents were asked to say how much they agreed or disagreed with certain statements on a five-point Likert-scale. Sometimes the statement was the opposite of interviewee perceptions. This was done in order to prevent acquiescence bias in the answers (a response bias where respondents have a tendency to agree with all the questions).[37]

The first statement concerned the superficiality of political coverage in the Icelandic media. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the coverage is superficial. As illustrated, this was a dominant theme in answers from politicians and journalists.

Table 4. Perceptions concerning the superficiality of political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	153	13	(11.1-14.9)
Somewhat agree	474	40	(37.2-42.8)
Neither agree nor disagree	387	33	(30.3-35.7)
Somewhat disagree	149	13	(11.1-14.9)
Strongly disagree	20	2	(1.3-2.7)
Completed answers	1183	100	
No answer/incomplete	79		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Political coverage in the Icelandic media is generally superficial*

The answers were quite clearly in one direction, with the majority in agreement with interviewees. As table 4 shows,[38] 53% of respondents agreed with the statement, whilst only 15% disagreed with it. Of those who either agreed or

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[36] Subsequent chapters also investigate public participation and interactions with politicians and journalists, not simply perceptions, as done here.

[37] Discussed in more detail in the previous chapter.

[38] *Note*: Answers in all tables are reported after weighing. This is so they represent the Icelandic population. The total number of respondents can therefore vary slightly, depending on how answers are weighed for each question. Furthermore, percentages are rounded, so they do not always add up exactly to 100.

disagreed, over three times as many agreed with the statement that the political coverage is generally superficial. Thirty-three per cent neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This view was even more dominant in the interview answers, with over 90% of both journalists and politicians discussing the coverage in terms of superficiality, and how this is problematic as it relates to the democratic roles of the media.

Table 5. Perceptions concerning critical questions in political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	20	2	(1.3-2.7)
Somewhat agree	250	21	(18.7-23.3)
Neither agree nor disagree	344	29	(26.4-31.6)
Somewhat disagree	405	34	(31.3-36.7)
Strongly disagree	169	14	(12.0-16.0)
Completed answers	1188	100	
No answer/incomplete	74		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media generally asks questions that are critical enough in its coverage of politics in Iceland*

The second statement focused on whether the media asks questions that are critical enough in the political coverage. The interviews suggested that the dominant perception is that the media is often not critical enough, and this was frequently discussed in relation to the watchdog role. Table 5 illustrates that almost half of the respondents, or 48%, disagreed with the statement that the questions asked are critical enough. Twenty-three per cent agreed with the statement, and 29% neither agreed nor disagreed. So, of those who either agreed or disagreed, over twice as many disagreed with the statement. This is similar to the interviewees' observations. Answers focused much more on the fact that there is, in general, a lack of criticism in the political coverage.

The third statement examined whether the Icelandic media conducts enough investigative work when it covers politics in Iceland. The interviews suggested that the dominant perception is that the media does not conduct enough of its own work to initiate stories. Too much of the political coverage is reactive and event-based. Again, this was discussed negatively in relation to democracy.

Table 6. Perceptions concerning investigative work in political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	19	2	(1.3-2.7)
Somewhat agree	173	15	(13.0-17.0)
Neither agree nor disagree	425	36	(33.3-38.7.)
Somewhat disagree	435	37	(34.3-39.7)
Strongly disagree	135	11	(9.2-12.8)
Completed answers	1187	100	
No answer/incomplete	75		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media generally conducts enough investigative work when it covers politics in Iceland*

As shown in table 6, the answers were again quite clear. Only 17% agreed with the statement that the media conducts enough investigative work when covering politics, whilst 48% disagreed with it. Of those who agreed or disagreed with the statement, almost three times as many disagreed. Thirty-six per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

The fourth statement focused on resources. Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that the Icelandic media has enough financial resources to produce quality political coverage. As discussed previously, the interview answers suggested that journalists and politicians perceive the media lacking in financial resources and this lack contributing to less quality political coverage. This is the case even more so in Iceland than in larger states, echoing the structural peculiarities of small media systems introduced by Puppis (2009).[39]

As table 7 shows, more public respondents disagreed with the statement, and this suggests again that their perception of the situation is similar to the interviewees. Only 20% of respondents agreed with the statement that the Icelandic media has enough financial resources, whilst 37% disagreed with it. Of those who agreed or disagreed, almost twice as many disagreed with the statement. It is worth highlighting here that a very high percentage, or 44%, neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. This is not surprising. In certain parts of the survey, respondents were asked to answer questions for which they are not necessarily

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[39] This will be discussed in more detail in the next section of the chapter as it relates to the interviewees.

in a position to know the answer. This can influence how many people choose not to agree or disagree. Moreover, these are quite simplified statements that aim to map the general perceptions, and therefore do not allow for the same nuances as interview answers do. This can potentially lead to people opting to neither agree nor disagree. In spite of the high percentage of these answers, it is still very clear that, of those who either agreed or disagreed, a much larger number agreed with the interviewee answers.

Table 7. Perceptions concerning the media's financial resources

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	32	3	(2.1-3.9)
Somewhat agree	196	17	(14.9-19.1)
Neither agree nor disagree	524	44	(41.2-46.8)
Somewhat disagree	325	28	(25.5-30.5)
Strongly disagree	104	9	(7.4-10.6)
Completed answers	1181	100	
No answer/incomplete	81		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media generally has enough financial resources to be able to produce quality political coverage*

The fifth statement in this section of the survey focused on the negativity of political coverage. The interview answers suggested that journalists and politicians perceive the media focusing much more on negative rather than positive stories. As table 8 shows, 39% agreed with the statement, whilst 18% disagreed. So, of those who agreed or disagreed, over twice as many agreed with the dominant theme from the interviews that the coverage is negative. Again, a high percentage neither agreed nor disagreed (43%).

Table 8. Perceptions concerning the negativity of political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	9	8	(6.5-9.5)
Somewhat agree	373	31	(28.4-33.6)
Neither agree nor disagree	513	43	(40.2-45.8)
Somewhat disagree	196	17	(14.9-19.1)
Strongly disagree	14	1	(0.4-1.6)
Completed answers	1186	100	
No answer/incomplete	76		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Political coverage in the Icelandic media is generally negative*

The sixth statement focused on whether the Icelandic media provides citizens with reliable information to judge politicians' work.

Table 9. Perceptions concerning the reliability of information on politicians' work

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	18	2	(1.3-2.7)
Somewhat agree	278	24	(21.6-26.4)
Neither agree nor disagree	471	40	(37.2-42.8)
Somewhat disagree	333	28	(26.4-30.6)
Strongly disagree	81	7	(5.6-8.4)
Completed answers	1181	100	
No answer/incomplete	82		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media generally provides citizens with reliable information to judge politicians' work*

The interview answers suggested that politicians perceive the media as not necessarily providing the public with this type of information. This perception was echoed in the answers from the journalists. The assumption appears to be that the media is failing in its democratic watchdog role when it comes to reporting reliably on those in positions of power in the political sphere. More respondents disagreed with the statement (35%) than agreed with it (26%), and the public therefore, once again, answered similarly to the interviewees. The difference here is smaller than in the previous answers focused on media performance and content. The public appears to be slightly less negative here towards the media than journalists and politicians. It is worth noting, again, the high percentage of those who neither agreed nor disagreed (40%).

The seventh statement asked whether respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement that there are too few journalists working in the Icelandic media, and that this leads to less quality in the political coverage. This is, like statement four, a question of resources, but here the focus was specifically on human resources, not finances. The interviewees were virtually unanimous in their opinion that the media is far too short-staffed, and this leads to less quality in the coverage.

Table 10. Perceptions concerning human resources and the impact on political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	134	11	(9.2-12.8)
Somewhat agree	297	25	(22.5-27.5)
Neither agree nor disagree	581	49	(46.2-51.8)
Somewhat disagree	154	13	(11.1-14.9)
Strongly disagree	19	2	(1.3-2.7)
Completed answers	1185	100	
No answer/incomplete	77		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *There are in general too few journalists working in the Icelandic media and this leads to less quality in the political coverage*

As shown in table 10, 36% agreed with the statement, whilst only 15% disagreed with it. So, of those who agreed or disagreed, over twice as many agreed with the statement than disagreed. Here, almost half of all respondents (49%) neither agreed nor disagreed. The results were not as dominant as in the interview answers, and this might be related to the fact that many people are not familiar with the number of journalists working in the media, and how the numbers have shrunk.

The final statement in this part of the survey focused on whether political coverage in the Icelandic media generally gives an accurate picture of politicians' work in the parliament. Interview perceptions suggested that the media is mainly focused on superficial sound bite debates in the parliamentary chamber, and that journalists do not focus on much of the other work that takes place in parliament, such as the more substantive work that takes place 'behind the scenes' in the committees.

Table 11. Perceptions concerning accuracy in political parliamentary reporting

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	11	1	(0.5-1.5)
Somewhat agree	241	20	(17.7-22.3)
Neither agree nor disagree	475	40	(37.2-42.8)
Somewhat disagree	335	28	(25.4-30.6)
Strongly disagree	126	11	(9.2-12.8)
Completed answers	1188	100	
No answer/incomplete	75		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Political coverage in the Icelandic media generally gives an accurate picture of politicians' work in the Icelandic parliament*

Again, public perceptions appear to point in a similar direction as those of politicians and journalists. Only 21% agreed with the statement, whilst 39% disagreed. Thus, of those who agreed or disagreed, almost twice as many appear to be more in agreement with the perceptions of journalists and politicians. Forty per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

To sum up, in this part of the survey, focused on media performance and content, the perceptions of the public seem to echo those of journalists and politicians. In *all eight statements* that relate to superficiality, critical coverage, investigative work, financial resources, negativity, reliable information, human resources, and the accuracy of the coverage, there were *far more respondents in agreement than disagreement* with the dominant themes from the interviews. There were generally twice or three times as many who agreed with a majority of the interviewees than those who disagreed with them. In several answers, a large number of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements but in these instances, the number of those who did agree with the interviewees was always much higher than for those who disagreed with them.

The statements examined in this section can be related back to the ideal democratic roles of the media: serving as a watchdog; staging a debate; and representing the people (Curran 2002). If the coverage is superficial, missing reliable and accurate information, as well as investigative reporting, it is difficult to argue that the media is performing these roles well. And this might influence the fact that there appears to be little trust in the media's coverage. The survey found that only 26% of the public trust the media 'very much' or 'fairly much' in its coverage of Icelandic politics. A similar number, or 29%, answered that the media does a 'very good' or 'fairly good' job when covering Icelandic politics. As discussed in chapter 2, trust in the Icelandic media ranks low, in general terms, compared to many other countries.

As highlighted earlier, the survey answers are more superficial than the interview answers since there is no possibility for further probing, and they were not worded in an open way as the interview questions were. They can therefore

simply give a very general idea of some the overall broad perceptions in Iceland. In spite of these limitations, it is clear that in all eight statements the majority of those who agreed or disagreed always answered in similar ways to the interviewees. This further strengthens the dominant themes that emerged in the interviews and implies that large percentages of the public agree with the politicians and journalists in relation to these issues.

A majority of the politicians and journalists interviewed were under the impression that the political coverage in the media became more critical following the crisis. Some interviewees argued that this had made the coverage better, whilst others felt that it had mainly become quite ruthless. Three statements on this were included in the survey.

Table 12. Perceptions concerning quality of coverage post-crisis

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	53	5	(3.7-6.3)
Somewhat agree	350	31	(28.3-33.7)
Neither agree nor disagree	469	42	(39.1-44.9)
Somewhat disagree	167	15	(12.9-17.1)
Strongly disagree	75	7	(5.5-8.5)
Completed answers	1114	100	
No answer/incomplete	148		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been of higher quality following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis*

The first focused on whether political coverage has been of higher quality following the crisis and its aftermath than it was before the crisis. As table 12 shows, 36% of respondents agreed with the statement that the coverage has been of higher quality, whilst 22% disagreed with it. So a somewhat higher percentage agreed with a majority of those interviewed than disagreed with them. Forty-two per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. The second statement emphasised whether or not the coverage has been more ruthless following the crisis than prior to it.

Table 13. Perceptions concerning ruthlessness of coverage post-crisis

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	115	10	(8.2-11.8)
Somewhat agree	457	41	(38.1-43.9)
Neither agree nor disagree	393	35	(32.2-37.8)
Somewhat disagree	126	11	(9.1-12.9)
Strongly disagree	22	2	(1.2-2.8)
Completed answers	1113	100	
No answer/incomplete	150		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been more ruthless following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis*

As table 13 shows, the answers here were more clearly in one direction than for the previous statement. Approximately half (51%) of respondents agreed with the statements, whilst only 13% disagreed with it. Thirty-five per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. As mentioned, a smaller number of interviewees focused on this ruthlessness aspect, so here it appears that the public perceives this as a more dominant theme than politicians and journalists do.

Table 14. Perceptions concerning critical coverage post-crisis

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	100	9	(7.3-10.7)
Somewhat agree	533	48	(45.1-50.9)
Neither agree nor disagree	353	32	(29.3-34.7)
Somewhat disagree	103	9	(7.3-10.7)
Strongly disagree	22	2	(1.2-2.8)
Completed answers	1111	100	
No answer/incomplete	153		
Total	1264		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been more critical following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis*

The third and final statement focused on the dominant perception in the interviews that the coverage has been more critical following the financial crisis and its aftermath than it was before. As shown in table 14, the public overwhelmingly agreed with the interviewees here. Over half (57%) agreed with the statement that the coverage has been more critical, whilst only 11% disagreed with it. So of those who agreed or disagreed, over five times as many agreed with interviewees than disagreed. Those who neither agreed nor disagreed made up approximately a third (32%) of respondents. It is worth highlighting here the difference in perceptions in comparison to table 5. Even

though the coverage might be viewed as 'more critical', it is not seen as 'critical enough' by a majority of respondents.

The perceptions concerning criticism following the crisis cannot be understood solely in relation to the media, but rather need to be examined with regard to increased distrust in society following the crisis, and the active role of the public in putting critical issues on the agenda. This theme will be explored in more detail in chapter 7, since it relates to people using social media, mainly Facebook, to open up debates and influence political coverage.

Most interviewees discussed how politicians routinely behave in a particular way solely to get themselves noticed in the media. This was frequently linked to the short segments in the parliamentary chamber, 'störf þingsins', 'fundarstjórn forseta', and 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir'.

Table 15. Perceptions concerning politicians getting themselves noticed in the media

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	203	19	(16.7-21.3)
Somewhat agree	466	43	(40.0-46.0)
Neither agree nor disagree	329	31	(28.2-33.8)
Somewhat disagree	56	5	(3.7-6.3)
Strongly disagree	19	2	(1.2-2.8)
Completed answers	1073	100	
No answer/incomplete	189		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Icelandic politicians sometimes make decisions and behave in a particular way solely to get themselves noticed by the media*

Table 15 illustrates that an overwhelming majority, 62%, answered that Icelandic politicians sometimes make decisions or behave in a certain way solely to get themselves noticed by the media. Only 7% disagreed with the statement and 31% neither agreed nor disagreed. This can be related to media logic and the third phase of mediatization as introduced by Strömbäck (2008). As shown earlier, this emphasises how politicians adapt their behaviour to suit the media's needs. In relation to this, it was illustrated in chapter 3 how other wide terms such as 'soft news' and 'infotainment' are sometimes used to describe how political coverage is increasingly personalised, as well as presented more as 'entertainment' and a 'competition'. This is commonly linked to the mediatization of politics and the

behaviour of politicians. As Strömback (2008) states: 'as is known by political actors, conflict and personalization are among the important storytelling techniques that the media prefer when choosing what and how to cover politics' (p. 238). Politicians will therefore construct events that focus on these aspects. Three additional statements were included in the survey in relation to this literature.

Table 16. Perceptions concerning the media covering politics as a competition

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	149	14	(11.9-16.1)
Somewhat agree	448	42	(39.0-45.0)
Neither agree nor disagree	375	35	(32.1-37.9)
Somewhat disagree	82	8	(6.4-9.6)
Strongly disagree	12	1	(0.4-1.6)
Completed answers	1066	100	
No answer/incomplete	196		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media increasingly covers politics as a competition between politicians and political parties at the expense of a substantive debate*

Table 16 illustrates that 56% of respondents agreed with the statement that the Icelandic media increasingly covers politics as a competition at the expense of substantive debates, whilst only 9% disagreed with the statement. Thirty-five per cent neither agreed nor disagreed. This is similar to the theme that emerged in a majority of the interviews concerning how the short segments in the parliamentary chamber are presented as a competition and those who are 'loudest' and use 'the biggest words' often win. This was commonly discussed in relation to the fact that the media focuses more on the entertainment aspects, rather than substantive debates.

Table 17. Perceptions concerning the media covering politics as entertainment

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	106	10	(8.2-11.8)
Somewhat agree	352	33	(30.2-35.8)
Neither agree nor disagree	461	43	(40.0-46.0)
Somewhat disagree	128	12	(10.1-13.9)
Strongly disagree	29	3	(2.0-4.0)
Completed answers	1076	100	
No answer/incomplete	187		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media increasingly portrays Icelandic politics as entertainment rather than real news*

Forty-three per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that the Icelandic media increasingly covers politics as entertainment, as illustrated in table 17. Only 15% disagreed with the statement and 43% neither agreed nor disagreed. Finally, regarding the personalised aspect, 38% of respondents agreed with the statement that the Icelandic media increasingly covers politicians' private lives, whilst 20% disagreed. Forty-one per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Table 18. Perceptions concerning the media increasingly covering politicians' private lives

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	89	8	(6.3-9.7)
Somewhat agree	324	30	(32.8-27.2)
Neither agree nor disagree	443	41	(38.0-44.0)
Somewhat disagree	183	17	(14.7-19.3)
Strongly disagree	28	3	(2.0-4.0)
Completed answers	1067	100	
No answer/incomplete	195		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media increasingly focuses on the private lives of Icelandic politicians*

Concepts such as infotainment and soft news are often not defined in detail and routinely appear to be focusing on similar issues regarding media *content*, as discussed in chapter 3 (e.g. Reinemann et al. 2012). Moreover, the mediatization of politics literature highlights similar issues, but is often discussed in relation to adding a *process* or *behavioural* aspect to the literature. That is, the news coverage is increasingly superficial, more focused on personalities and horse-race coverage, and politicians adapt their behaviour to suit these superficial needs (Strömbäck 2008). The previous four statements can be linked to this literature, focusing both on the content aspect and the behavioural one. In order to see if these statements are linked to each other (as the mediatization literature would suggest), I conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to see if the statements loaded onto the same factor. Put simply, I did this to see if they were correlated and therefore seem to be measuring a similar underlying construct. Latent variables, or factors, 'represent clusters of variables that correlate highly with each other' (Field 2018, p. 780).

In the exploratory factor analysis, I follow the work of Maurer and Pfetsch (2014), who have done similar measurements in relation to 'media logic'. As they

mention, news coverage that is characterised by media logic is often discussed, for example, in relation to emphasising strategy over substance, mixing up political news and entertainment, and oversimplifying complex issues. In addition to this, the aspect of politicians behaving in a particular way solely to get themselves noticed by the media can be added to this list. Since the emphasis in this literature is often on oversimplification, I also included the previous five statements focused on superficiality and media content that can be related to the watchdog role of the media (asking critical questions, providing the public with accurate information, conducting enough investigative work, and so forth).

As shown in table 19, the nine statements loaded onto two factors: 'media logic' and 'watchdog' The four statements measuring politician's behaviour to get themselves noticed by the media, media coverage of politicians' private lives, media coverage as a competition, and politics increasingly being discussed as entertainment, loaded onto the same factor I named 'media logic'. This means that the answers to these four statements correlated highly with each other and can be seen to an extent to be measuring a similar underlying construct, which emphasises *the content and behavioural aspects* linked to media logic. The other five statements loaded onto another factor I named 'watchdog', and they can therefore also be seen to be highly correlated with each other. These focus on *media content and performance* in relation to the watchdog role.

As shown earlier in the answers from respondents, they perceive media coverage to be increasingly guided by media logic. Put simply, it is not just the case that the media content is more focused on entertainment, personalisation and competition aspects, but also that politicians are seen to adapt their behaviour to suit the superficial needs of the media. Moreover, the answers showed that the media is not performing well in its watchdog role. The political coverage is increasingly superficial, and this is correlated with the lack of critical questions, lack of investigative work and so forth. This is not meant to be an all-encompassing measurement concerning these two underlying constructs, but rather to illustrate how the answers presented earlier are correlated highly with each other in relation to these factors.

Table 19. Exploratory factor analysis of the 'watchdog' and 'media logic'

	Watchdog	Media logic
Political coverage in the Icelandic media is generally superficial	-0.596	
The Icelandic media generally asks questions that are critical enough in its coverage of politics in Iceland	0.72	
The Icelandic media generally conducts enough investigative work when it covers politics in Iceland	0.692	
The Icelandic media generally provides citizens with reliable information to judge politicians' work	0.76	
Political coverage in the Icelandic media generally gives an accurate picture of politicians' work in the Icelandic parliament	0.692	
Icelandic politicians sometimes make decisions and behave in a particular way solely to get themselves noticed by the media		0.342
The Icelandic media increasingly focuses on the private lives of Icelandic politicians		0.427
The Icelandic media increasingly covers politics as a competition between politicians and political parties at the expense of a substantive debate		0.711
The Icelandic media increasingly portrays Icelandic politics as entertainment rather than real news		0.659
Eigenvalues	3.44	1.49
% of variance	38.2	16.6

Note: Principal axis factoring analysis. Rotation method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalization (four iterations). Both factors together explain 54.8 percent of the variation. Factor loadings < .3 are suppressed.

This section showed that public perceptions are very similar to those of journalists and politicians concerning media content and performance. Far more respondents agreed than disagreed with the dominant themes from the interviews. Furthermore, the public perceives the coverage to be increasingly guided by media logic, which can be linked to commercialisation and market-driven news values, as outlined in chapter 3. These answers all point in a similar direction: The media is suffering from resource constraints and its coverage is increasingly superficial. Somewhat paradoxically, public perceptions also show that the financial crisis did, to an extent, lead to the coverage becoming more critical, ruthless and better. This is similar to what many interviewees said, but, as stated, this cannot be understood in isolation from wider societal developments.

Put simply, it can be argued that a more challenging environment for legacy media outlets following the crisis has negatively impacted political coverage in relation to the ideal democratic roles of the media. Resource constraints in a small

media system (where resources were scarce even before the crisis compared to larger states) have led to increasingly superficial coverage. The final section focuses in more detail on the key themes that emerged from the interviews concerning the perceived reasons behind this type of political coverage. This sets up a structural framework for the following chapters.

5.3. Superficial coverage: A mix of smallness and funding

What is described here in relation to the superficial political coverage and shortage of resources is not unique to Iceland (e.g. McChesney & Pickard 2011). Perceptions from the interviews suggested, however, that there is concern that the situation in Iceland is much more extreme than elsewhere. This was commonly linked to Iceland's very small and heavily commercialised media market. When asked why the media coverage is the way it is in Iceland, the most dominant theme by far concerned the *lack of resources* in relation to the *commercial small market conditions.* Put simply, it is a mix of smallness and funding.

As was illustrated in chapter 2, the Icelandic media market is very small and continues to shrink. At the same time, it is more commercialised than the markets in the other Nordic countries. Fewer and less experienced journalists produce more material than ever before, and this leads to more superficiality in the coverage, according to interviewees. The struggles of the small media market were often discussed in relation to large companies like Facebook and Google taking increasing amounts of advertising revenue. Also, many journalists and politicians criticised the fact that *RÚV* is allowed to sell advertisements. It has been seen as more commercialised than PBS stations in the other Nordic countries since advertising sales amount to approximately 1/3 of its revenue. In this sense, *RÚV* has always also been a commercial station (Broddason & Karlsson 2005). In relation to this, some interviewees noted how it often seems to operate more like a market-driven outlet than a PBS station.

Nearly all of the journalists interviewed said that their working conditions keep getting worse (both at the private outlets and *RÚV*) and that this has an impact on the quality of material they are able to produce. The salary being offered is very low compared to PR and other linked areas of work and the pressure is often almost unbearable. As one of them simply stated after discussing this (interview 2): 'I often think after a long and difficult day: Why on earth am I doing this? Seriously?'

Another journalist (interview 1) discussed how the coverage is increasingly superficial and that journalists in general worry about this:

> I think that most people who work in the media in Iceland are very capable individuals and are interested in what they are doing, but the working conditions in the Icelandic media are, in my view, too bad…There is too much emphasis placed on producing a lot of material in a short amount of time.

When discussing this, a large majority of interviewees brought up the issue of specialisation, or, more accurately, the lack of it. Few experienced journalists are left to cover political affairs and there is for example only one journalist permanently based in the Icelandic parliament now. Most of the journalists are not present to observe what is taking place and this leads to less depth in the political coverage according to many interviewees. The next chapter follows up on this point as it explores the relationship between journalists and politicians in more detail and discusses the lack of experience, specialisation and 'institutional memory' in the spheres of journalism and politics.

Most of the politicians interviewed pointed to structural factors related to the smallness of the Icelandic media market, rather than criticising the journalists themselves, when they discussed problems with the political coverage. They often stated that journalists are trying to do a good job, but that the lack of resources makes it impossible for them to dig deep. As one of the senior politicians (interview 23) said when talking about how political coverage has changed:

There used to be more journalists permanently based here in the parliament, and this meant that there was more continuity in the coverage and there was more focus on covering news from the parliament. Now the coverage is very superficial. There are a lot of exciting things taking place, but it is usually just 'störf þingsins' and similar slots that get the attention. These are usually the least interesting debates. People using big words at the start of the day...The political coverage is much more focused on headlines and short comments than before. There used to be a few key points during the day when you would listen to the news, such as during the lunchtime on the radio and during the evening television broadcast...Now you have a continuous news stream throughout the day. You have less time to respond properly and all the focus is on speed. What you write on Facebook is then picked up. I think politicians could sometimes take a while longer to think things through before they respond.

This development was discussed in many interviews. Interviewees often highlighted that the media in Iceland has never been particularly strong compared to the larger states because of the smallness of the market, but now with increased commercialisation and less revenue, the situation has become much worse than it used to be. The themes of *smallness* and *difficult market conditions* were usually interlinked. When the market is structurally vulnerable to begin with, it is clear that it will face more difficulties than markets in the larger states. This was clearly evident in the interview answers. As one of the more senior journalists (interview 48) put it succinctly, in relation to the aftermath of the crisis: 'There were so few of us to begin with. So this was too big of a blow.'

Most saw the larger outlets, including *RÚV*, as producing more superficial coverage than before. Content analysis of news reports in the Icelandic media shows a high level of similarity in content and suggests that homogenisation has increased considerably (Guðmundsson 2012). The interview answers seem to echo this, although *RÚV* was often mentioned as having more resources and doing a somewhat better job than the private outlets. Interestingly, it was mainly the smaller outlets *Kjarninn* and *Stundin*, which were both created post-crisis by journalists and are largely funded through subscriptions and online donations, which were seen to be producing the most in-depth investigative coverage. But this was usually seen as somewhat sporadic and narrow since these outlets are

very small. Several of the more right-wing politicians criticised *Stundin* and argued that its coverage is often unfair and too far to the left.

Social media featured heavily when discussing why the coverage is more superficial than before. What politicians write on Facebook is often now used in news stories, sometimes without any further sourcing. And, as is the case with the sound bite friendly speeches in parliament, the Facebook status is often constructed with the needs of the media in mind. This will be examined in more detail in chapter 7, where it will be illustrated how politicians are increasingly bypassing the legacy media, and, again, this is seen to be somewhat different to the situation in larger states.

The smallness of the Icelandic society is perceived to have a *structural* impact on the media market and resources, but it is important to highlight that there are also *socio-cultural* factors related to smallness. According to many interviewees, journalists are often hesitant to focus critically on difficult issues because this can problematise their future career and access to powerful individuals. Multiple role relationships and 'managed intimacy' further complicate matters. This will be explored further in the following chapter focused on the politician-journalist relationship.

Journalists have been sued in Iceland for covering issues critically and this can create a 'chilling effect' and make them less critical in their reporting, according to several interviewees. Another issue that was highlighted by many interviewees concerned concentrated ownership in the Icelandic media market. This was, however, usually seen to be much more problematic concerning financial news than routine political coverage, although the two are clearly interlinked, as many pointed out. As illustrated in chapter 2, the two biggest newspapers in Iceland (*Fréttablaðið* and *Morgunblaðið*) and several other outlets are owned by special interest groups, and many of the interviewees mentioned that these outlets clearly have an agenda when it comes to finance, fisheries, certain political parties and so on. This has been discussed as a problem for the Icelandic media market (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018). It was also noted that well-

financed individuals and groups are often the only people who can possibly own the larger outlets in the small media market, since market conditions will usually lead to the outlets not having enough revenue to survive without additional funds from wealthy individuals and groups.

The public was also asked about these issues concerning concentrated ownership. One of the statements simply asked if the Icelandic media is owned by too few individuals.

Table 20. Perceptions concerning concentrated media ownership in Iceland

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	398	36	(33.2-38.8)
Somewhat agree	396	36	(33.2-38.8)
Neither agree nor disagree	271	24	(21.5-26.5)
Somewhat disagree	24	2	(1.2-2.8)
Strongly disagree	22	2	(1.2-2.8)
Completed answers	1111	100	
No answer/incomplete	152		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *The Icelandic media is owned by too few individuals*

It is clear from the answers that the public perceives the media as being in the hands of too few individuals. As table 20 shows, an overwhelming 72% of respondents agreed with the statement, whilst only 4% disagreed with it. Approximately a quarter (24%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

Second, respondents were asked if there is too much connection between certain media outlets and interest groups in Iceland. As table 21 illustrates, the public again was very clear here. Two thirds (66%) of respondents agreed with the statement that there are too close connections between certain media outlets and interest groups, whilst only 4% disagreed with the statement. Thirty per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

Table 21. Perceptions concerning connection between media outlets and interest groups

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	355	32	(29.3-34.7)
Somewhat agree	381	34	(31.2-36.8)
Neither agree nor disagree	331	30	(27.3-32.7)
Somewhat disagree	35	3	(2.0-4.0)
Strongly disagree	9	1	(0.5-1.5)
Completed answers	1111	100	
No answer/incomplete	152		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement*: There is too much connection between certain media outlets and certain special interest groups in Iceland*

Many interviewees said that they have no problem with media outlets aligning themselves with particular opinions, but this needs to be 'out in the open' so that people know where they stand. As illustrated, an overwhelming majority of the public perceives connections between special interest groups and media outlets to be 'too close'. Related to this, the public was asked if the media is independent enough, in the sense that outside groups and individuals do not have significant influence on its coverage.

Table 22. Perceptions concerning the independence of the Icelandic media

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	19	2	(1.2-2.8)
Somewhat agree	147	13	(11.0-15.0)
Neither agree nor disagree	321	29	(26.3-31.7)
Somewhat disagree	443	40	(38.8-42.9)
Strongly disagree	186	17	(14.8-19.2)
Completed answers	1116	100	
No answer/incomplete	147		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement*: The Icelandic media is in general independent enough, in the sense that outside groups and individuals do not have significant influence on its coverage*

As table 22 illustrates, only 15% of respondents agreed with the statement that the media is independent enough, whilst 57% disagreed with it. So, out of those who either agreed or disagreed, over three times as many disagreed with the statement that the media is independent enough. Twenty-nine per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

These findings concerning concentrated ownership, connections to special interest groups and independence were fairly predictable based on the discussion in chapter 2 concerning the Icelandic media market. There has been much talk about concentrated media ownership in Iceland in recent years (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018). When discussing this, most of the journalists mentioned this as more of a problematic issue on the editorial level (that is, with editors having to deal with owners). Journalists seldom interact with the owners in relation to their everyday work. This was also seen to be more dominant in editorial content rather than news coverage. Put simply, this does not factor heavily in influencing the daily work concerning *routine* political coverage, according to the journalists. A few mentioned they were glad not to be working on financial news, where there was seen to be more interference in journalists' work.

Political parallelism can, to some extent, still be seen to exist in Iceland, and was brought up numerous times in the interviews in relation to specific outlets. This refers to the link between political actors and the media (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Unsurprisingly, the most prominent example concerned the conservative Independence Party and *Morgunblaðið*. One of the party's former leaders, and the former prime minister of Iceland, Davíð Oddsson, now serves as the editor of the paper. This was mentioned as a problem in a majority of the interviews, including in interviews with some of the MPs from the Independence Party. Oddsson is too close to many political issues and the reputation of the paper has clearly suffered after he took over, according to interviewees. This was particularly discussed in relation to editorial content in the paper and not so much the routine political coverage, although it too was seen to be affected by this to an extent.

In relation to the discussion concerning political parallelism, the public was asked if there is too much of a connection between certain political parties and certain outlets. As shown in table 23, a very substantial majority, or 71%, agreed with the statement that there is too close of a connection between certain political parties and media outlets in Iceland, whilst only 4% disagreed with the statement. Approximately a quarter (26%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Based on how

much attention Oddsson has received as editor, this is not surprising. In another part of the survey, respondents were asked to link specific outlets to political parties. Predictably, the connection between the Independence Party and *Morgunblaðið* was by far the most dominant, with an overwhelming 96% of respondents linking the two.[40]

Table 23. Perceptions concerning connections between media outlets and political parties

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	361	32	(29.3-34.7)
Somewhat agree	430	39	(36.1-41.9)
Neither agree nor disagree	286	26	(23.4-28.6)
Somewhat disagree	21	2	(1.2-2.8)
Strongly disagree	18	2	(1.3-2.7)
Completed answers	1111	100	
No answer/incomplete	148		
Total	1264		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *There is too close of a connection between certain media outlets and certain political parties in Iceland*

When all is taken together, a dominant theme clearly emerged at the start of the interview process and continued throughout. There was agreement on this *across the political spectrum and at all media outlets*. Despite the various other issues raised (highlighted in this section), resource constraints in relation to *funding* and *smallness* was by far the most common answer that emerged in the interviews when discussing the *routine* political coverage. It was argued that other issues like ownership, threats of lawsuits and connections to politicians and political parties can influence reporting in relation to bias, self-censorship and so on. But this was seen to be more of a potential problem when there is a big and important issue to report in the news, and in relation to key events, like elections (and, as stated, more on the editorial level). The resource issue in relation to smallness was, by far, seen as the most pressing one that affects *the daily working practices* of journalists and, as a result, routine political coverage.

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[40] The Independence Party was also linked by a large majority (94%) to the website *mbl.is* (the website associated with *Morgunblaðið*), as well as *Viðskiptablaðið* (81%). No other media outlet was linked to a political party by a majority of respondents. Several interviewees highlighted the fact that politicians have sometimes tried to discredit *RÚV*'s coverage by linking it to certain political parties, but the survey showed that a majority of respondents did not link *RÚV* to a particular party.

Previous research on Icelandic journalists appears to back this up. According to Ahva et al. (2017), journalists in Iceland (like their Nordic colleagues) consider objective reporting to be very important in their work and see themselves as detached watchdogs. Their professional identity is also one of autonomy, experiencing little influence from politics in their daily work (Ahva et al., 2017; Kolbeins, 2012; Nord, 2008). However, another study on the state of journalistic professionalism in Iceland showed that, although oriented towards public service, journalists 'are undermined by the realities of the media market' (Guðmundsson and Kristinsson 2017, p. 17).

These realities on display here reveal perceptions of increasingly tough working conditions and resource constraints that force journalists to produce more superficial reports. The politicians are then contributing to the mediatized superficiality as previously illustrated. The overall perception is that the legacy media is not adequately doing its job in disseminating information about politics and holding the politicians accountable. As one of the politicians (interview 27) said:

> I think MPs would do less of these types of speeches and not behave this way if we had more in-depth coverage and current affairs shows that really did their homework and made sure that we would have to answer substantive questions.

This was echoed in many of the interviews. What is needed is real analysis of the big political issues and fault lines, following legislation from the beginning through the committee work, and really focusing on the substance of what is in there. As one of the politicians (interview 15) succinctly put it: 'At the moment, the public mainly has access to political coverage through the debates in the parliamentary chamber. This is a problem.'

Conclusions

As Iceland is one of the five Nordic countries, one might assume that it could be in a somewhat better position to respond to the crisis of the news media than many other countries. The rich Nordic states have supported public and private

outlets more than many other states (Syvertsen et al. 2014). This chapter, however, showed perceptions to be the opposite. The mix of smallness and mainly commercial funding models results in even more superficial and problematic coverage than in many larger states, according to the interviews. The survey answers illustrated that the public does, to an extent, appear to agree with answers from politicians and journalists. Most interviewees did not seem to find it difficult to generalise about the media market as a whole, although *RÚV*, *Stundin* and *Kjarninn* were often mentioned as examples of outlets doing a better job of disseminating important political information and holding those in power to account (particularly when some big event was taking place). What clearly emerged as a theme was a heavily homogenised small media system, very different from the ideals of media pluralism that highlight the democratic importance of a range of different voices being heard.

The fact that the data collection was based around routine political coverage led to some interesting findings. Problems related to ownership concentration and political parallelism were much more discussed in relation to big events like elections and divisive pieces of legislation. Several of the interviews were conducted shortly after the election that was called following the Panama Papers scandal that resulted in the prime minister resigning. Despite this, hardly any interviewees brought this up and, instead, did not seem to find it difficult to generalise about the mundanity of the superficial political coverage and the democratic problems related to it. I argue that we must be careful not to overemphasise key events being representative of political coverage overall. The chapter showed how the mundane is, to an extent, perceived in a different way than other types of political coverage centred around big events. Certain outlets were seen to 'step up their game' during key events for a limited time. But after that things went back to 'normal'.

As outlined previously, the traditional conception of the democratic roles of the media are: 1) the watchdog role, 2) being an agency of information and debate, and 3) representing people to authority (Curran 2002). It is currently very difficult for journalists in Iceland to fulfil either the watchdog role or that of being

an agency of information and debate. Superficial, homogenised and reactive coverage are clearly the opposite of what is required of the media according to these normative ideals. Representing people to authority is the third key democratic function of the media, according to traditional liberal theory. The government is supervised by the people through the media between elections. Or, in more simple terms, it is often claimed that the media speaks for the people and represents their interests and views in the public domain (Curran 2002, p. 227). Perceptions concerning routine coverage in Iceland highlight that the media also appears to be failing here. It is much more focused on reacting to what politicians say and do rather than supervising them on behalf of the people.

Regarding the ideal role of representing the people to authority, I argue that the legacy media is less influential in political communication dynamics in a small state like Iceland than in larger states. This is because media outlets are not necessarily required as mediators between people and those in power. And, as shown here, since the legacy media is breaking down, it is to some extent incapable of being this mediator. Routine offline and online interactions between politicians, journalists and the public in the small state play an important role in the political communication ecology and complicate the picture. The focus now shifts to these interactions, beginning in the offline world.

CHAPTER 6:
So close yet so far away –
The relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland

The nature of the routine relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland is examined in this chapter. This investigation deepens the understanding of the perceived reasons behind the superficial political coverage outlined in the previous chapter, and it moreover makes an intervention into established political communication debates concerned with journalist-politician relations. The relationship between journalists and their political sources has long been viewed as an important area of study in political communication research, since it is a vital part of the news media's democratic function. As such, it is important to study exchanges between journalists and politicians since they influence how political news content is shaped (e.g. Albæk et al. 2014).

Much of the literature on journalist-source relations can be defined in terms of two analytical paradigms; the 'adversarial-exchange' line and the investigation of 'pluralist-source conflict' (Davis 2010). As shown in chapter 3, the former emphasises that the core issue is relative power. On a day-to-day basis, the working relationship between the two groups is an uneasy one. Both sides need each other but are pursuing differing professional objectives (e.g. Schudson 2011; Blumler & Gurevitch 1995). Journalists need access and politicians want publicity. What emerges is a 'tug of war' in which sources attempt to 'manage' the news and put the best light on themselves, whilst journalists concurrently 'manage' the sources in order to try to extract the information they want (Gans 1980). Conversely, in the pluralist-source conflict paradigm, the emphasis is on comparing how sources seek to gain a platform for their views and whether the news media adequately reflects pluralist opinion, with much of the literature emphasising the media's reliance on high government sources (e.g. Tiffen et al. 2014; Barnett & Gaber 2001).

Another strand of research illustrates limitations with these two paradigms. It shows that the relationship is more complicated and cannot simply be understood by studying who is more in control (the adversarial-exchange line)

or whose voices are heard (pluralist-source conflict). It focuses on how the relationship between politicians and political journalists has become intense, co-determining, and reflexive as both sides incorporate the other within everyday decision-making and thinking. Research has shown how politicians and journalists jointly construct political coverage and politics itself within private networks, usually national parliamentary settings (Dindler 2015; Davis 2010).

The relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland has not been studied before. I argue that there are certain limitations in the existing journalist-source relations literature when it comes to defining and examining politician-journalist relations in the small state. Frameworks based on the previously outlined paradigms need to be *expanded* in two fundamental ways in order to examine the Icelandic case.

First, journalist-politician relations on the national level have mainly been examined within private networks and spheres, such as Westminster in the United Kingdom. The chapter shows that there is not a single site like this in Iceland where intense professional interactions routinely take place. Instead, because of blurred boundaries in the small country, relations between journalists and politicians take place in many different settings that cannot be isolated within professional private spheres. This relationship is distinct from previous findings in the literature on the national level because of small state social closeness and multiple role relationships. The existing journalist-politician foundations, built on the dichotomies between public and private networks, as well as professional and non-professional settings, need to be reconfigured to examine the Icelandic case.

Second, because the existing literature has mainly focused on examining journalists and politicians within private sphere networks, it has mostly ignored the public. This is problematic regarding the Icelandic case. The smallness of the society means that there is much direct interaction between elites and the public, and this can have an effect on the relationship between journalists and politicians and, importantly, who sets the agenda. I therefore argue that journalist-politician

relations in Iceland need to be understood in the context of interactions with the public. The aim of the chapter is, therefore, not only to examine *the nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists* but also *the nature of the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public.*

The previous chapter illustrated how journalists and politicians in Iceland understand the role of the media as a public sphere for staging debates through information dissemination, and, related to this, serving as a watchdog. This can be linked back to the democratic ideals of the news media defined as holding those in power to account, staging an open and public debate on important issues, and representing the people (Curran 2002). The findings in the present chapter illustrate how the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland contributes to difficulties for the media in fulfilling these roles. At the same time, the inclusion of the public shows how citizens play an important part in holding people to account and disseminating information without the legacy media necessarily being the central mediator.

The chapter is in three main sections. The first section illustrates how Icelandic politicians and journalists are more closely connected than research from larger states has shown. This is a potential problem when it comes to the media fulfilling its watchdog role. The second section focuses on resource constraints and how Iceland's smallness results in both journalists and politicians needing to be mobile generalists rather than specialists in key areas. This has an impact on their daily working practices, their relationship, political coverage in the media, and politics itself. It can complicate the watchdog role and political dissemination. Again, this differs to some extent from the prior literature, which has focused on 'political journalists' and beat reporting existing in bubbles detached from the public.

Finally, the third section shows to what extent the social settings and working conditions discussed in sections one and two, interlinked with the breakdown of the legacy media outlined in the previous chapter, results in *increasingly* more professional distance between media and political elites in Iceland. There is deep

social closeness and, at the same time, *professional distance* between politicians and journalists in Iceland. This is in stark contrast to the professional closeness between politicians and journalists that much of the previously outlined journalist-politician literature has shown. Like the previous chapter, this one examines themes from the 50 interviews with Iceland politicians and journalists. Moreover, relevant questions from the representative survey sent to 2000 Icelanders (63% response rate) are analysed.

6.1. Complicated and deep multiple role relationships

A dominant theme in the interviews concerned the blurred boundaries between public and private roles in the small country and complicated connections between people. Commonly this was summed up along the lines of 'of course we are all connected somehow'. The blurring of boundaries has several implications for the relationship between politicians and journalists, as illustrated in this section. Intense, deep and multi-layered connections between the two groups can be problematic when it comes to the media fulfilling its watchdog role. The perception among both journalists and politicians was that the smallness could make it more difficult to be fair, impartial and critical. It was also argued that, to some extent, the smallness of the state can lead to unfair criticism, since it sometimes situates individuals within family and political connections that are difficult, if not impossible, to escape.

'Everybody knows everybody'
It is clearly not a new revelation that politicians and journalists are often close and form friendships (e.g. Johansson & Nygren 2019). A majority of interviewees highlighted the fact that they had gotten to know people from the 'other side' through their working relationship and that sometimes this led to some sort of friendship. There is, however, another and more nuanced layer to this closeness theme that needs exploring. This is more unique to smaller societies and complicates the relationship. In almost all of the interviews (47 out of 50), the smallness of Icelandic society was perceived as a dominant influence on the relationship between journalists and politicians.

In a small society, as opposed to a larger one, it is much more likely that you *previously* know people you need to work with professionally, or know someone who knows that person. Apart from that, there is a good chance that you are related. This can be linked back to the sociology of size and managed intimacy introduced in chapter 2, in which the argument is that people in small states need to learn how to get along with people they will know through their entire lives in many different contexts. It is not only the small size of the state but also the durability of most relationships that fosters sophisticated modes of conduct (Lowenthal 1987). What makes small societies different from the larger ones are *multiple role relationships*. In a small-scale society, the individual can interact over and over again with the same individuals in all sorts of social situations (Benedict 1966).

A majority of interviewees gave answers that can be linked to this sociological theme related to smallness. Keeping the proper professional distance between politicians and journalists in Iceland was often described as a tricky 'balancing act' because of the various types of connection that can exist. Lines often become blurred. As one journalist (interview 1) summed it up:

> If one of your friends is running for parliament it puts both individuals in a difficult situation. You know, should I as a journalist be interviewing someone I have known personally for a long time? And I think the answer to that question is no. But should I contact him and get information from him? I mean, how should I use a relationship that has existed for a long time? I think there are many more examples in a small society like this when it comes to various connections. It is just simply way more likely that there are connections between people who are of a similar age than in larger societies.

Not only were similar views echoed in a majority of the interviews with both politicians and journalists, but the differences with larger states were also highlighted. Interviewees acknowledged that of course journalists and politicians can develop close bonds in larger states, but they noted that in smaller states it is more likely that you have several different connections to the same person. These often occur away from the work environment, through friends, family, school and so on. Icelandic society as a whole was therefore contrasted to more closed off

networks in larger states. For example, it was mentioned that if you are part of the elite upper classes in the United Kingdom, you will go to similar schools and universities as others from the same class with similar interests, and, will know people from these earlier years later on and form various connections.

Even though more closed off networks also exist in Iceland, it was argued that multi-layered connections between people also span *society as a whole*. In this sense, Iceland was, to an extent, described as one large and dense network.[41] The findings from a recent study of elites in Iceland point in a similar direction as the interview perceptions. It found that there are 'strong professional elites in different spheres, but they remain relatively open and recruited on the basis of merit and professional criteria' (Kristinsson 2018, p. 26). It is therefore not necessarily the case that elites are closed off within their private networks, as is often the case in larger states. This is a key difference and was seen by a majority of interviewees to greatly influence the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland. Possibilities for connections between people are 'everywhere'. As one journalist (interview 49) said:

> Elites in the United Kingdom are, for example, a large group that is often quite closed off. Elites in Iceland are not living in some closed off neighbourhoods or gated communities. You show up at an extended family gathering and maybe one of the government ministers shows up there…You are maybe in the hot tub talking about a particular politician and it might just be that a close cousin of his is in the hot tub as well and listening to you talking like this. So you need be aware of this. There is usually someone around you who is connected somehow.

It was mentioned by a majority of the journalists that it is probably much more common in Iceland than in larger states that journalists cannot cover specific topics or interview certain people because of prior connections. They stated that if they were unsure of whether there was too much closeness to a particular person or issue in the news they would mention this in editorial meetings. The

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[41] This is similar to one of the small state personalism dimensions Corbett and Veenendaal (2018, p. 9) have defined. Small states have a limited private sphere and at the same time the public sphere is expanded. In relation to democratic politics, this can result in remarkably transparent political systems but at the same time clear lines of accountability are blurred and corruption concerns can be magnified.

necessity of having journalists from different backgrounds working at media outlets was identified as an important solution to this problem. However, because of increasing staff shortages and the small size of the media outlets, it was highlighted that there are often just one or two journalists covering political issues at any given time at each of the outlets.

Many journalists emphasised that if they were clearly pushing a particular agenda, being soft on political parties or particular people because of obvious connections, their credibility as journalists would quickly disappear. This theme of fragile credibility was often discussed in relation to the importance of being upfront and aware of the connections that could damage one's reputation. As one journalist (interview 5) put it:

> I take it very seriously and am extremely careful in this regard. Because you know we live in Iceland, and, even though people here have all sorts of connections, they might not all be out in the open. And you do not want to take advantage of anything. You know I think people would feel betrayed if they found out about some crucial connection that journalists have after agreeing to be interviewed for a particular story where the journalists could clearly be seen as biased.

Both politicians and journalists mentioned that those journalists who are clearly using their connections to mainly interview people they know, or politically agree with, can (and do) still work as journalists. However, they often lack credibility, especially if they are clearly pushing a particular political agenda. Examples of this were usually mentioned in the interviews in relation to specific journalists and media outlets. This can be linked back to the discussion in chapters 2 and 5 focusing on how elements of political parallelism still remain in Iceland (Guðmundsson 2013), and how certain outlets are seen as close to well financed individuals and groups. Perceptions of particular connections between specific media outlets and journalists on the one hand, and political parties on the other hand, were clearly revealed in the interview answers. At the same time, it was highlighted by a majority of interviewees that there is generally less tolerance for overt political reporting now than during the party press era of the previous century, and journalists quickly lose credibility with the public if they are showing clear political biases.

Since Iceland is such a small country, every single politician and journalist mentioned that they often run into people from the 'other side' in non-official settings, such as the supermarket, the pub, at birthday parties, and the geothermal swimming pools and hot tubs (frequented by Icelanders all year round). The politicians mentioned that they often chat briefly with the journalists about something that is happening on the political scene and that the journalists try to get some information in this setting. This was backed up in a majority of the interviews with journalists. They mostly try to leave the politicians alone but sometimes try to talk briefly about certain topics to get information. These non-official venues are frequently the only points of physical contact between journalists and politicians nowadays, as illustrated in more detail later in the chapter.

The intense closeness between people in the small country was often discussed as creating problems regarding to the watchdog role of the media. It can be very difficult to be impartial and critical with someone you might have some connection to and bump into the next day in a non-professional setting. Positive elements of the smallness were, however, also emphasised regarding information dissemination, particularly with regard to easy access to key figures and short chains of command. If you need to get in touch with someone in Iceland, you can simply pick up the phone and ring them directly, or send them a text message, or, as seems to be most common nowadays, a message through Facebook Messenger (as will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter).

If something urgently needs to be done, it can be quickly carried out because of the short chains of command. It is easy for people to meet up and solve issues, and there is a lack of bureaucratic layers found in larger states. Bray and Packer (1993) have shown how the speed of decision making and implementation can be much quicker in small states This was, for example, mentioned in the interviews as a critical aspect of how Icelandic authorities managed to react quickly to the financial crisis and pass emergency legislation. This can be linked to arguments from political theorists concerning the idea that 'small is beautiful', and can be traced back to antiquity and the Greek city states (Dahl & Tufte

1973).[42] According to Plato and Aristotle, but also Montesquieu and Rousseau, smallness leads to a more governable state (Aristotle 1996; Rousseau 2003, cf. Corbett & Veneendaal 2018, p. 145).

A majority of the politicians interviewed seem to be under the impression that they are much more accessible to journalists than politicians in larger states. As one politician (interview 17) said:

> I think there is much better access. But I of course do not know that for sure. But I think there is much access here. I think the media has a lot of access to politicians and they often get, I think they almost always get interviews with politicians...and most politicians are very much willing to discuss the issues.[43]

This view was partly backed up by a majority of the journalists. They pointed out that it is usually straightforward to get interviews with MPs in the opposition parties, but sometimes difficult to get interviews with government ministers and certain politicians have refused interviews to specific media outlets. Several politicians admitted to not being particularly interested in being interviewed by certain outlets (since they felt that these outlets have a particular agenda), whilst most said they tried to accommodate interview requests from all outlets.

In general, the themes found here closely resemble the small state trait of higher personalism and a particular type of small state social ecology (Sarapuu 2010). Small states are characterised by a high degree of interpersonal relations where boundaries are blurred. As Farrugia (1993) illustrates, small states with a small number of inhabitants tend to develop closely integrated societies containing an intricate network of personal relationships. People know each other (or know someone who knows someone whose service they need), so ministers,

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[42] Smallness limits the number of competing interests and the Aristotelian belief is that political stability is best maintained when the citizenry can meet and debate matters of concern (Corbett 2015).

[43] As another politician (interview 50) put it: 'In larger states you might have something like 100 journalists wanting an interview with a particular political if something big is going on. That is never the case here. It is much easier for politicians to answer all the interview requests since there are so few journalists.'

parliamentarians, influential businessmen, journalists and others are easily reachable.

The perceived socio-cultural influence of smallness on political coverage

To date, smallness has mostly been factored into the media and politics relationship on the national level in relation to media systems. Researchers have placed the emphasis on how structural aspects can lead to a more vulnerable media system (Puppis 2009), as outlined earlier in the thesis. Here the theme of smallness is expanded to *socio-cultural* factors concerning relationships between people. Over two thirds of interviewees focused to some degree on the fact that the smallness of the society is negative for the watchdog role of the media, since it can be a possible hindrance when it comes to producing fair and critical news reports. This is in spite of the previous discussion concerning journalists not covering topics or people they are closely linked to, and the short chains of command argument. Interestingly, most of the politicians seemed to take it as a given that Icelandic journalists do in fact often interview people that are connected to them somehow, and this was also often the case when journalists were discussing *other* journalists. A common view on the smallness and political coverage was along these lines, as discussed by one of the politicians (interview 18):

> Connections are often very close and it is difficult, in some instances, to conduct a very critical interview with someone who you might be meeting at the next large extended family gathering or just at the next reception somewhere. You know, you are always in the same place. If something is happening in Iceland, some big event, then you are always in the same place as everyone else. You understand? And even more so if you are part of some media and political elite. That is just the way things are.

Another politician (interview 11) similarly stated how the smallness does influence the coverage:

> Yes, I think it influences the coverage both directly and indirectly. All kinds of issues can arise. And you find it difficult to cover them as a journalist just because the person in question is just a really nice acquaintance and you have your children together in kindergarten. Your

children have had a play date after school. And then you think: Should I cover this issue? I cannot do it, you know…So yes, it does influence.

In smaller societies, personalism can engender conformity (Baldacchino 2012) and here this implies some form of self-censorship. This is different from the more specific and narrow types of self-censorship or bias related to special interest groups or political parties, outlined in the previous chapter. Interviewees discussed the wider 'smallness self-censorship' in relation to the 'everybody knows everybody' theme. People are close and this can create problems and make it more difficult to be objective and critical in political coverage. Even though people try not to let the smallness influence the coverage, it is difficult to get away from the small state social ecology. As another politician put it (interview 14):

> This is just human nature. You do not attack your friend. It is not, you would rather criticise someone you do not know. You will not get up after a dinner party at your friend's house and then attack him in the newspaper the next day. That is just normal. So yes, it must influence the coverage to some extent.

There are often some sort of family connections or connections through mutual friends and this can impact the political coverage, perhaps often unintentionally. The journalists similarly stated that the smallness could result in uncritical and biased coverage, sometimes unconsciously.[44] As one of them (interview 3) stated: 'I think you can end up being less critical. If I am completely honest. But I do not necessarily think that people realise this though.' The journalist went on to say that if a politician you are interviewing is related to your friend, then this might lead you to make the headline a little bit less critical, or stop you from asking that one very difficult question. None of the journalists admitted to doing this themselves, but either mentioned that they knew of examples where this had

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[44] As one journalist said (interview 8): 'You will most likely write differently about your acquaintances compared to people you didn't know beforehand. I think it would be dishonest to admit anything else.' Another journalist (interview 5) emphasised that the closeness can be difficult: 'Of course people try not to allow it to influence the coverage, but I think it does influence it. Both in a good and bad way. It can be beneficial, you know. If you somehow have trusting relationships, then the journalist can get better information, but at the same time it can also stop you from writing something you think is uncomfortable.'

happened or that they could imagine that this did happen. As another journalist (interview 49) said:

> The smallness can have an effect on the coverage even if you are not personally close to it in any way. If you know, for example, that one of your colleagues is involved somehow through family or friends in a story you are working on, then this can of course influence how you cover it.

It was mentioned in many interviews that it sometimes seems to be the case that Icelandic journalists do not want to be 'rude' when asking questions. As one journalist (interview 22) simply put it: 'I have often asked myself if we are maybe just too polite when we are interviewing politicians.' If you are being critical, the consensus often is that you are simply being 'rude' and 'unfair' and this was, again, linked to the smallness of the society and connections between people.[45] Many journalists saw closeness as a barrier to being tough on politicians. They also mentioned that politicians could use this to try and limit critical questions they get. As one journalist (interview 33) said: 'Politicians sometimes try and use this by attempting to make you feel rude or stupid by saying: What kind of question is that?'

Most politicians said that they did not necessarily know many specific examples of the smallness impacting the relationship or uncritical reporting along these lines, but rather that the danger is always there for this to happen, and that it is likely to impact the coverage. Relatedly, a number of journalists subsequently told stories of themselves in some very awkward and difficult encounters with politicians in unofficial settings like the gym and the supermarket after writing critical news reports about them. Aside from these accidental encounters, it was highlighted that the smallness means that it is easier for politicians to get in touch with a journalist directly if they are unhappy with how something is reported.

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[45] As another journalist said (interview 10): 'If you are criticising someone, you are basically just the rude guy, and this is often considered out of bounds.' In relation to this, one politician (interview 27) said similarly that the smallness can make people very codependent, and that this is a big problem in Icelandic society: 'People can say: Why are you being so tough on my cousin? It is difficult to be hard on someone you have to meet at your grandmother's house the next day.'

It was noted, however, by the more senior journalists interviewed, that politicians in general complain much less about political coverage nowadays than in previous years. It used to be common for politicians to phone directly and complain about specific reports, or if certain issues had not been covered. This was related to remnants from the party press era when politicians often expected to be able to dictate what type of coverage they would get. What is more frequent these days is for politicians to publicly complain about political coverage (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018), and, as noted in many interviews, this can lead to less critical reporting and self-censorship. The non-profit organisation *Reporters Without Borders* has, for example, expressed concern with Icelandic politicians attacking certain media outlets. This was, however, only discussed with regard to a few politicians and news items. In general, with regard to the *routine* political coverage, most interviewees said that politicians usually do not complain about it openly. As highlighted in the previous chapter, connections between politicians, special interest groups and the media are often considered more problematic on the editorial and ownership level. Journalists in their everyday work environment seldom encounter problems related to this, according to the interviews.

Perceived problems with homogeneity and small state 'groupthink' were emphasised when discussing difficulties with the media staging informed debates from several different angles. This can be related back to the democratic role of the media in relation to media pluralism. A majority of the politicians mentioned that when an MP is interviewed about a particular topic she or he often gets requests from other outlets with similar questions. The journalists follow what the other journalists are doing. As one of the politicians (interview 14) simply put it: 'You know exactly which questions you are going to get because you have just done the exact same interview with another outlet.' Journalists seem to have a similar view of what is newsworthy and there needs to be more variety and originality in their reporting, according to the politicians. The same people are always being interviewed, and this can result in a very narrow view of the world.

This can be even more problematic in a rather homogenous small state as opposed to more diverse larger states where this is also viewed as a problem, for example, when it comes to the reliance on official sources. In a small state like Iceland, a tiny group of people are constantly being interviewed and this results in very narrow views being presented, even more so than in the larger states, according to interviewees.[46] Put simply, smallness can stifle pluralism (Baldacchino 2012). The smallness of the society from a socio-cultural angle is therefore not only seen as a problem for the watchdog role of the media, but also its ideal democratic role as a source of pluralist debate.

It was moreover mentioned, although much less frequently, that the smallness can result in journalists being more critical as opposed to less. This was more common in answers from politicians who have been MPs for a few years. Often this was linked to the fact that the journalists interviewing politicians are trying to 'prove themselves', particularly if they are seen to be in some way connected to that particular politician or his party. A few journalists also spoke along similar lines. One said that he often finds he can be more blunt and critical with people he knows well. As he stated (interview 4): 'I am less afraid to say to people I know: You know you have to answer this. You cannot get away with not answering these questions.'[47]

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the perception that Icelanders often situate people through their family tree. It is often difficult to escape from that and to create your own independent identity. This is commonly done to both journalists and politicians, where critics try to link extended families with particular agendas, and many interviewees mentioned that this can be very unfair. People often do not stand a chance to create their own identity if they

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[46] As one politician (interview 25) put it: 'The viewpoint is not wide enough because of the smallness of the society. There are too few people commenting on the issues on the news, and the scope is too narrow. It is always the same people.' Linked to this, one of the journalists (interview 44) said: 'The population of Iceland is basically the same as the population of Coventry in England, so this of course has an effect on the limited talent available to fill all the necessary roles in the society. The group is a lot smaller than in larger states.'

[47] Interestingly, only three interviewees mostly dismissed the issue of 'smallness' when it comes to political coverage and felt that it was more important to think about the type of journalism and political culture that has developed in Iceland, as opposed to the smallness of the society.

come from a prominent family in business or politics. Also, if journalists participated in politics with one of the youth wings of the political parties before becoming journalists, it is often used against them, sometimes even decades after their involvement. This can, again, complicate the watchdog role of the media, since this type of discourse can be used to try to discredit the work of journalists.

Corruption, nepotism, clientelism and patronage were frequently mentioned in the interviews with regard to the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland, and about politics and the society more generally. Connections can be considered too close.[48] Perceptions of corruption amongst the public have been increasing in Iceland since the financial crisis. This is perhaps not surprising since trust in most institutions dropped significantly, as highlighted earlier in the thesis. The most recent corruption perception index from *Transparency International* finds Iceland in 14th place (jointly with Australia and Hong Kong) of the least corrupted countries in the world (TI 2019). Despite the high ranking, Iceland is perceived as the most corrupt of the Nordic countries and its score has steadily declined since 2012. *The Group of States Against Corruption* (GRECO) highlighted in 2015 that the lack of transparency and conflict of interest is a pervasive problem in the Icelandic government, and a recent survey found that two out of three Icelanders believe that Icelandic politicians are corrupt (Júlíusson 2018).

The survey answers from the public were used to gauge similarities and differences in perceptions between politicians, journalists and the public, as outlined in chapter 4. The answers from the questions that focused on smallness, homogeneity and closeness show similar perceptions as those of journalists and

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[48] As one politician (interview 13) stated: 'The smallness obviously means that politicians have friends in journalism, and there are often deep connections and…you can influence a lot through that. In some places you would call this corruption.' In relation to this it was mentioned that connections between people are often not discussed and that, if they are pointed out, you are accused of being 'unfair' to that particular person. As one politician (interview 11) stated: 'This seems to be the consensus in Iceland: We all know each other. We are in the same family and this is just below the belt to be pointing this out.' Corruption, nepotism, clientelism and patronage were linked to small states more generally in the 39 comparative small state study by Corbett and Veenendaal (2018).

politicians. Participants were asked whether the smallness has a positive or negative effect on political coverage in the media. The negative and positive aspects were introduced in the survey in relation to the themes that had emerged from the interviews, so positivity was linked to the short chains of command which can more generally be associated with the 'small is beautiful' argument. The negativity on the other hand was linked to difficulties in being fair and critical, which can more generally be associated with arguments from the sociology of size focusing on managed intimacy.

Table 24. Perceived effect of smallness on political news coverage in Iceland

	N	%	95% CI
Smallness has a much more positive than negative effect	62	5	(3.7-6.3)
Smallness has a somewhat more positive than negative effect	190	17	(14.8-19.2)
Smallness neither has a more positive than negative effect	329	29	(26.4-31.6)
Smallness has a somewhat more negative than positive effect	355	31	(28.3-33.7)
Smallness has a much more negative than positive effect	91	8	(6.4-9.6)
Smallness has no effect	118	10	(8.2-11.8)
Completed answers	1145	100	
No answer/incomplete	117		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked: *Some think that the smallness of the Icelandic society has a positive effect on political coverage. There are short chains of command and it is therefore easy to get access to information and interviews. Others think that the smallness has a negative effect on the coverage. Close and often personal connections mean that it is difficult for the media to report on politics in Iceland in a critical manner. On the whole, do you think the smallness in general has a positive or negative effect on political coverage in Iceland?*

As shown in table 24, only 10% of respondents said that they perceived the smallness to have no effect at all.[49] Twenty-two per cent of respondents said that the effect was more positive than negative, 29% said that the effect was equally positive and negative, whilst the most common answer was that the smallness is more negative than positive, with 39% of respondents agreeing with this. This is similar to the elite answers previously discussed. An overwhelming majority of those interviewed (47 of 50) observed that the smallness does have an effect, with a majority of those respondents focusing more on the negative effects. As shown here, of those who found the effect either more positive or negative, almost twice as many found it to be more negative than positive (39% vs. 22%).

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[49] *Note*: Answers in all tables are reported after weighing. This is so they represent the Icelandic population. The total number of respondents can therefore slightly vary, depending on how answers are weighed for each question. Furthermore, percentages are rounded so they do not always add up exactly to 100.

Relatedly, respondents were asked whether they agreed with the statement that the homogeneity of the nation could lead to less criticism in political reporting. Previous research on democracy in small states has often emphasised that homogeneity enhances democracy, since a convergence of interests amongst citizens are likely to stem from a more homogenous population (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018, p. 145). However, as discussed previously, smallness and homogeneity can also stifle pluralism and engender conformity (Baldacchino 2012), which can be problematic for the democratic role of the media as regards staging an informed and plural debate in the public sphere.

Table 25. Perceived effect of homogeneity on political news coverage in Iceland

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	103	9	(7.3-10.7)
Somewhat agree	352	32	(29.3-34.7)
Neither agree nor disagree	466	42	(39.1-44.9)
Somewhat disagree	157	14	(12.0-16.0)
Strongly disagree	35	3	(2.0-4.0)
Completed answers	1113	100	
No answer/incomplete	150		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Because Iceland is a rather homogenous nation there is in general less critical reporting in the political coverage in Iceland than in more heterogeneous societies*

A majority of the politicians and journalists interviewed highlighted homogeneity and groupthink as potential problems in relation to political coverage. As table 25 shows, 41% of survey respondents agreed with the statement that the homogeneity of the Icelandic nation means that there is less critical political coverage, whilst 17% disagreed with the statement. So of those who either agreed or disagreed, more than twice as many agreed with the statement (41% vs. 17%). Forty-two per cent neither agreed nor disagreed.

It was a dominant perception in the interviews that politicians and journalists are closely connected, and often *too* closely connected. According to interviewees, close personal relationships can interfere with fairness, impartiality and criticism in political coverage. Put simply, it can make it more difficult for the watchdog to bark. To examine how the public viewed the connection, respondents were asked

whether they perceived close personal connections between politicians and journalists in Iceland to be problematic.

Table 26. Perceptions of personal closeness between Icelandic politicians and journalists

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	128	11	(9.1-12.9)
Somewhat agree	324	29	(26.3-31.7)
Neither agree nor disagree	568	51	(48.1-53.9)
Somewhat disagree	87	8	(9.6-6.4)
Strongly disagree	13	1	(0.4-1.6)
Completed answers	1120	100	
No answer/incomplete	143		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *There are in general too close personal connections between politicians and journalists in Iceland*

As illustrated in table 26, only 9% disagreed with the statement whilst 40% agreed. So out of those who either agreed or disagreed with the statement, four times as many agreed that there are too close connections between politicians and journalists. Approximately half (51%) of respondents said that they neither agreed nor disagreed.

This section has shown that Icelandic politicians and journalists stated that the smallness of the society could blur boundaries between public and private roles. This can have implications for the journalist-politician relationship. The answers from the interviews illustrate that journalists and politicians can struggle with complicated and varied connections. The perception in most of the interviews was that Iceland's smallness can be positive in terms of short chains of command, but the dominant theme was it can make it more difficult to be fair, impartial and critical. This has implications for the watchdog role of the media. Moreover, smallness can stifle pluralism, resulting in difficulties in presenting open and informed debates in the public sphere. Public perceptions echo the interviewee perceptions in terms of the smallness of the society, homogeneity and closeness. Of those who had an opinion, a majority sees the smallness as more negative than positive, homogeneity leading to less criticism, and that politicians and journalists are too closely connected on a personal level. This suggests that the public also views the socio-cultural aspects of smallness as problematic as regards the democratic roles of the media.

The picture that has begun to emerge differs significantly from the existing political communication literature, which has emphasised intense and institutionalised professional interactions between journalists and politicians within private spheres and networks. In Iceland, the politician-journalist relationship exists in a more encompassing and deep network across the wider society, which is defined in terms of multiple role relations and managed intimacy. Another prominent theme related to the smallness concerns resource constraints, and how this affects working conditions, specialisation and mobility, as the next section examines.

6.2. Shortage of resources, generalists and mobility

Interviewees had similar views of the Icelandic media market. In general, Icelandic media outlets lack resources and are therefore far too weak. This assessment was shared across the political spectrum and at all media outlets, and can be linked to the discussion in chapter 5. The focus there was on examining perceptions concerning the media coverage itself in relation to the small market. Here the attention turns to how the small market affects the working conditions of journalists and politicians, and, ultimately, how this impacts the dissemination of political information. This section illustrates how the working conditions in the small market lead to journalists in Iceland lacking experience and specialisation. Moreover, journalism is not considered a profession to the same extent as it is in larger states. It is common for young people to work in the media for a few years before leaving for better-paid work and the perception is that this high turnover rate has several important consequences. Furthermore, there has been high mobility in Icelandic politics since the financial crisis, and MPs, like journalists, mainly need to be generalists. This contributes to thin and superficial knowledge in the political sphere, which is then covered by overworked and often inexperienced journalists who might not know much about politics.

The working conditions of journalists and politicians in Iceland
Most journalists said that their working conditions keep getting worse and this leads to less quality journalism. The salary offered in journalism in Iceland is very

low and the pressure is sometimes almost unbearable. The tough working demands often mean less time to prepare, and a majority of journalists admitted that they have conducted interviews without sufficient preparation and that there is usually not enough time to fact check material. Those who are working in the privately funded media seem to be under even more pressure than those working at public broadcaster *RÚV*, but the journalists working there also cited increasing resource constraints and difficult working conditions. The newsroom there was downsized following the financial crisis and the number of journalists working at *RÚV* has not increased since.[50] There is little time for investigative reporting at the private and public outlets and what tends to happen, then, is that journalists often end up using their free time to investigate their stories.

Since the newsrooms are very small in Iceland there is not much room for specialisation. All of the journalists said that journalists in Iceland are mostly generalists. As one journalist (interview 2) stated, Icelandic society as a whole is a society of generalists, and this is reflected in journalism practices:

> The way we work is that we have 30 different hats on because there are so few of us. And there are so few people working here. So everyone needs to run around a lot and basically you need to know how to do everything. You know, there is less specialisation here.

A majority of the journalists said that while they try to focus on certain areas they are interested in, such as politics or finance, that does not necessarily make them specialists and that they often need to produce reports in other areas as well. As one journalist (interview 1) put it when referring to journalists in Iceland:

> I think most people would say that they would like to be specialists, but they have to be generalists simply because of the quantity of news stories that have to be produced and the number of staff members that have to produce them.

Resource constraints simply do not allow Icelandic journalists to become specialists. And the contrast is stark in relation to other countries, including the

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[50] Resources have been diminishing at both the public and private outlets as shown in chapter 2.

Nordic countries. As one journalist (interview 9) stated after recently attending a large journalism event that included many Nordic journalists:

> I kept getting this question: What is your area of specialisation? And the only people I found I had similarities with in terms of the media environment were the journalists from Greenland. That is just how it was. It was the only group of journalists that I spoke to who also had to produce stories every single day, who could not spend time really investigating them properly and they had to be able to write about all kinds of issues.

It is worth noting here that the population of Greenland is just under 60,000 (The World Factbook 2019e). This comparison with the other Nordic countries is interesting, as Iceland is often simply grouped together with the other four much larger countries, as outlined previously in the thesis. Size has not been highlighted much in the comparative literature, but it was apparent in the interviews that Iceland's tiny media market significantly impacts journalism practices. Shortage of resources is one of the key structural peculiarities of small media systems, according to Puppis (2009), and the need for Icelandic journalists to be generalists rather than specialists can be linked to the second small state trait introduced in chapter 2 (Sarapuu 2010). This focuses on the fact that people in small states need to be more multifunctional since the small size limits possibilities for specialisation. Multi-functionalism exists, of course, in larger states as well. However, it has been shown to be increasingly more apparent as the scale of the population diminishes (Bray 1991). This can be linked to the 'continuum of size' definition outlined earlier. Simply put, it illustrates how the small state traits become increasingly apparent the smaller the size of the population becomes.

The work of Örnebring and Lauk (2010) is relevant to the multifunctional theme here. Their study of Estonian journalists showed that the shortage of resources for producing content immediately influences the distribution of tasks in the editorial office, the personal duties of each journalist and how journalists work. When resources are scarce, generalists are more useful to employers. As highlighted previously, the Icelandic press market has 'produced neither elite-oriented quality papers nor extremely populistic tabloids' (Karlsson 2004, p.

242). In a market as small as the Icelandic one there is little room for readership segregation, based on purchasing capacity and other socio-economic divisions. Since there is not much room for specialised in-depth reporting (or tabloid journalism), and most journalism products are aimed at the same group of people, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that the emphasis has been on the importance of wide rather than deep specialised knowledge.

Most of the Icelandic politicians agreed that journalists are mostly generalists (and need to be generalists), but moreover that basic knowledge about important issues is often sorely lacking and increasingly so with weaker media outlets, smaller staff numbers and less experienced journalists. As one MP (interview 13) put it:

> The media is weak. We know that. I do not think there is much disagreement on that. You do not get many people with a lot of substance...You maybe have just inexperienced people...a good journalist needs to be well informed about the society as a whole. Otherwise he will never be a good journalist. And he needs to be able to write in a way that he gets the message across in a clear and understandable way. You see it more and more, I am maybe reading a news report and I just do not understand anything about the issue the journalist is trying to write about. And this is of course a very serious handicap that weakens the media in the country. Because we of course agree that information is very important.

What is less discussed is the fact that many Icelandic MPs are also often lacking in relevant knowledge, and this again was linked to resource constraints and overwhelming work demands. If an MP wants to be productive and get things done, the pressure can become intense.[51] Twenty-two of the 25 politicians interviewed said that Icelandic MPs have to be, and are to a large extent, generalists. A majority described themselves as generalists. Several of the politicians compared the Icelandic parliament to larger parliaments in the Nordic countries and other European countries. There it is often possible to become an expert in particular areas and this was linked to the parliaments being much larger. At the time of interviewing, 6 of the 7 Icelandic political parties had 10 or

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[51] It was often highlighted that is also possible to just be a 'passenger' or 'lazy' MP.

fewer MPs (the total number is 63) but still needed to be able to vote on all issues and follow them during the committee stage.

According to a majority of the politicians, Icelandic MPs do become experts to an extent in the committee work (and bring experience from previous work), but the consensus from the interviews was that they need to know a little about many issues. This was discussed as both a positive and a negative aspect: positive in the sense that you get a good overview of what is going on as a whole and are quick to understand issues in all areas[52]; and negative in the sense that your knowledge is often very thin and limited. Interestingly, this latter, negative aspect is similar to what the politicians had been criticising the journalists for in the interviews. As one politician (interview 14) said:

> You have to know like 3-5 sentences about all kinds of things. So you can use that and show that you know something. But you seldom go deep. And in interviews and so on, it is the same. Journalists seldom go deep.

As illustrated in chapter 5, the overwhelming perception amongst politicians, journalists and public is that media coverage of politics in Iceland is too shallow and lacks critical analysis. The media is often discussed as the culprit and this is linked to the small commercialised media market, and specifically resource constraints.[53] Less attention has been paid to how Icelandic politicians' superficial knowledge could be a factor in the shallow reporting in the media.[54] This theme emerged in the interviews with Icelandic politicians in relation to their work demands and was more dominant in the interviews with the younger MPs. They discussed 'information overload' and that they are struggling to keep up. They get vast amounts of emails a day, have to prepare for committee meetings and parliamentary sessions, visit workplaces, attend receptions and prepare for media interviews, to name a few of their tasks. Those from the countryside also have to deal with very large constituencies that they travel to regularly. This is also the case with politicians in larger countries but the

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[52] This was linked to the short chains of command theme discussed in the previous section.
[53] A recent overview of the Icelandic media landscape showed similar findings (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018).
[54] This is similar to what Davis (2007) has found with regard to 'pseudo knowledge' in politics in the United Kingdom.

difference highlighted in many of the interviews is that the Icelandic parliament is so small that most Icelandic MPs do not have any members of staff.[55]

This 'information overload' aspect was routinely apparent in the interview experience itself, as politicians were often interrupted during our time by phone calls, text messages or messages on Facebook, and several of them had to be rescheduled on very short notice, some more than once. MPs complained to me that the parliamentary schedule is constantly changing and many highlighted the fact that the work in parliament would probably be much better if MPs had at least one staff member to help out with logistics. As one of the younger MPs (interview 18) said:

> You are always like, oh yes I had forgotten about this reception and this reception and this reception, and I have to be there and I have to be there. To be handling all this logistic work alongside having to deal with the media and trying to get yourself noticed and to be in your constituency and then to participate in policy work in different committees. That is just, this is hard.

Most MPs said that they are always trying to find the time to sit down and read up on important topics, but that they often do not have enough hours in the day.[56] In many interviews, politicians mentioned that they had met foreign colleagues (the Nordic countries and the United Kingdom were often mentioned as examples) who could not believe how little support they were getting. It was clear from the answers that MPs often feel that they do not know enough about legislation they are voting on and rely on their colleagues that sit on the relevant committees to fill them in. As one MP put it bluntly (interview 27): 'There is absolutely no chance that I can always know exactly what I am voting on.'

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[55] At the time of interviewing, government ministers could hire two political advisers, the leaders of all the political parties not in government could hire one advisor, and the parliamentary parties usually had at least one staff member. The Icelandic parliament has now passed a law that will increase the number of political advisors by 17 during a three-year period, meaning that by the end of 2021 there will be roughly 1/3 advisor per MP. Even after this increase this will be substantially less support than MPs get in larger states (Act no. 135/2018).

[56] The situation was to some extent different with the government ministers interviewed (who were all also MPs at the time) since they have political advisers and staff in the respective ministries who help keep them up to date on relevant issues related to their ministries.

The perception is that the thin knowledge in the political sphere is also a contributing factor when it comes to superficial coverage of politics in the media. The journalist might not be well informed about particular topics and lacks time to investigate, but at the same time the politician might not be able to answer more in-depth questions about the topic. The picture that emerges is one where professional characteristics are present but not much expertise. It became apparent in most of the interviews that both Icelandic politicians and journalists perceive their jobs being quite different to those of their colleagues in larger states where there is more room for specialisation. This can be linked back to what Farrugia (1993) argued regarding senior officials in very small states like Iceland, Luxembourg and Malta. They work under drastically different conditions than their colleagues in the larger states, even though their title and duties appear similar. As one politician (interview 23) said when comparing the Icelandic and Norwegian ministries: 'You know, you have one person working on something here related to the European Economic Area Agreement that ten people will be working on in Norway. One person doing the same thing as ten people.'

Power dynamics

Even though both politicians and journalists appear to often lack experience and in-depth knowledge, it was not the case that they are perceived as equals in the relationship. Over two thirds of the journalists said that politicians are more in control.[57] It was mentioned by over half of the journalists that politicians were even more dominant before the financial crisis when they usually did not have to answer difficult questions. The view now amongst journalists seems to be that journalists are somewhat more willing to ask difficult questions than before the crisis,[58] but that the politicians still have the upper hand in the relationship.

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[57] As one journalist (interview 6) stated with regard to the relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland: 'The politician is always more powerful. He has access to the information. And the journalist is always less powerful compared to the politician. That would be my assessment. And I do not think this has really changed following the crisis. We are after the information.' Another journalist (interview 4) assessed the situation like this: 'I think that politicians can get away with all kinds of bullshit. They do not answer questions if they don't want to and they sometimes just say what they want without the statements necessarily being fact checked.'

[58] This was linked to a lack of trust more generally towards politicians following the financial crisis as discussed in the previous chapter.

However, many journalists also argued that politicians are in fact more dominant than ever because of an increasingly weak media, as well as politicians' online behaviour, which will be examined in the next chapter.

As previously highlighted, journalists mentioned that it is often much more difficult to get information from politicians who come from the parties in government. And that government ministers routinely refuse to be interviewed. Soon after becoming opposition MPs, it is usually much easier to get them to agree to being interviewed. It was mentioned by several journalists that particular politicians (the same names were mentioned again and again) have refused to answer their requests, often for several years. Furthermore, certain politicians have boycotted media outlets and journalists. The journalists were highly critical of this and said that they usually mentioned in the news report that they were unable to reach the politician in question or that she or he was unwilling to be interviewed. Several journalists stated that, in larger countries, politicians would not be able to get away with this to the same extent. Media outlets there often have more journalists employed, so that they can be more persistent, show up at the politician's house and so forth. In Iceland, the journalist is usually chained to her or his desk, working on several stories. If politicians repeatedly ignore requests, journalists are forced to move on to other things.

It was also discussed, in relation to the power balance, that the number of libel cases against Icelandic journalists has increased in recent years and that these are often used to try and silence and intimidate journalists and media outlets. This has been shown to influence self-censorship and create a 'chilling effect'. Libel cases can be particularly damaging for smaller media outlets since they can seriously impact financial resources, even if the outlets eventually win their case (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018). This has also been used as a tactic in other small states to try and silence journalists (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018).

Previous research on small states has shown that the executive branch of government can dominate other spheres much more so than in larger countries (Sutton 2007). This can be applied to Iceland, which has a form of coalition

government that is based on ministerial government. This means that the division of portfolios between parties functions as the basic mechanism of managing coalitions, and ministers are therefore policy dictators in the sense that they control their ministries mostly without interference from their coalition partners (Indriðason & Kristinsson 2018). This political situation can lead to certain individuals having much more power than they would be able to in larger states because of the lack of formal structures they need to take into consideration. This can be related back to small state dimensions of personalism. Everyday politics in small states tend to be highly reliant on informal dynamics and certain individuals can therefore be much more autonomous than in larger states and dominate politics (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018).

This lack of formal structures does not, however, simply mean that certain politicians can have a lot of power. It can also lead to individual journalists having much agenda-setting power. A majority of the journalists interviewed brought up the issue of the lack of editorial input and, again, linked this to the smallness of the media outlets. More editorial decisions would be welcomed, but they also find the freedom positive. There are often instances when big political developments occur and then they are prioritised, but, especially during slow news days, the journalists' interests are usually what decide the topics covered. As one of the journalists (interview 3) simply stated:

> If I want to cover a particular issue, there is almost a 100% or maybe 98% chance that I can focus on that issue, and not only that, I can basically cover it the way I want. That is if I am bossy enough. No one will stop me.

This echoes findings from the Worlds of Journalism survey where Icelandic journalists reported a high degree of autonomy at work, with 85.9% saying that they had either complete freedom or a great deal of freedom in selecting stories. Also, 88.2% said that they had either complete freedom or a great deal of freedom in deciding which aspects of a story should be emphasised. However, far fewer journalists, or 40.8%, reported participating always or very often in editorial co-ordination (Kolbeins 2017).

This flexible autonomy can be linked to what several politicians and journalists discussed in terms of some Icelandic media outlets increasingly being more defined by a few young and inexperienced journalists working superficially on random material rather than guided by a clear editorial policy. This was, however, contrasted with the newer, smaller and more critical outlets like *Stundin* and *Kjarninn*, which seem to 'know what they are doing' according to many interviewees. In general, the interview answers seem to suggest that the lack of editorial support for journalists often leads to the younger and more inexperienced ones being much less dominant in the relationship with powerful politicians. Examples were given of journalists hired to fill vacancies over the summer who ended up interviewing the prime minister shortly after starting on the job.

The answers from the politicians regarding who is more dominant in the relationship differed somewhat from the journalists' assessment. Only a few stated that politicians are more dominant and this answer was more common amongst the senior politicians. Most of the MPs said that it depends on the issues and the seniority of the people interviewing or being interviewed and some mentioned that the journalists are more powerful. Many of them highlighted that ministers can be more powerful than ordinary MPs. This echoes previous empirical findings from larger states (e.g. Van Aelst et al. 2010).

In certain answers it did appear as though the politicians are, in general, more dominant than their direct answer to the question might suggest. As one politician (interview 16) stated when asked about political coverage: '…if you frame issues well yourself, if you, for example, want to get a particular issue covered, then you basically can write the story yourself.' What she meant by this is that if you do the background work and package it for the media, then journalists will basically cover the story the way you want. She suspects that this is because of resource constraints.[59]

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[59] Similarly another MP (interview 12) mentioned that knowing how to write a good press release is beneficial. If you write them like a news story, it is very easy for the journalist to just press copy and paste. This is especially true in relation to online news sites and puts the politician in the driver's seat.

Another MP (interview 15) mentioned that she has told news reporters to turn off the camera because the questions she was getting were so bad and clearly the journalist had 'no clue' about the issue. She said that she was not trying to influence the coverage but rather to give the journalist some solid material to base the questions on. After that, the camera was switched back on. And furthermore, she said:

> ...I have even had a journalist ask me: What should I ask about? Because the person in question just did not know the topic. And I just thought: Ok, this is clearly embarrassing, but you know I of course wanted to get the issue some coverage. So I did that.

Meaning that she gave the journalist a set of questions. Another politician (interview 16) mentioned that before she does an interview on television she usually briefly chats with the journalist beforehand:

> And then he kind of tells you what he is going to say and then you can say: Look this is not quite the way it is. And I at least try not to take advantage of that. Rather I try and mainly use this window to explain if something is not quite right and to get the right information across.

Reverting back to the survey, the public perceptions in Iceland seem to be similar to those of the interviewees. Respondents were asked which side they perceived to be more dominant in the journalist-politician relationship.

Table 27. Perceptions on the power dynamics between politicians and journalists in Iceland

	N	%	95% CI
Politicians are very much dominant	124	11	(9.1-12.9)
Politicians are somewhat more dominant	352	32	(29.3-34.7)
Politicians and journalists are equally dominant	319	29	(26.3-31.7)
Journalists are somewhat more dominant	244	22	(19.6-24.4)
Journalists are very much dominant	72	6	(4.6-7.4)
Completed answers	1111	100	
No answer/incomplete	153		
Total	1264		

Respondents were asked: *It can be said that politicians and journalists need each other. Journalists need information from politicians and politicians need journalists to get coverage on the issues they are working on. Who do you think in general is more dominant in this relationship in Iceland, politicians or journalists?*

A majority of the interviewees said, or implied, that politicians are more dominant (and this was usually linked to a weak media), whilst fewer said it was

evenly matched and even fewer that the journalists are more in control. Almost all of the journalists viewed politicians more in control, whilst the answers were more mixed from the politicians. Table 27 illustrates that 43% of Icelanders perceived politicians to be more dominant in the relationship, 29% saw the relationship as equally balanced, whilst 28% perceived journalists to be more dominant. The dominance of politicians seems to be slightly more prevalent in the interviewee perceptions as opposed to the survey, but the public perceptions are in general similar to the interviews, with most viewing politicians as dominant, and smaller numbers viewing the relationship evenly matched, or journalists as more dominant.

Moreover, respondents were asked if they agreed with the statement that politicians and journalists possess general superficial knowledge as opposed to specialised knowledge.

Table 28. Perceptions concerning politicians' general superficial knowledge

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	291	26	(23.4-28.6)
Somewhat agree	470	42	(39.1-44.9)
Neither agree nor disagree	290	26	(23.4-28.6)
Somewhat disagree	48	4	(2.8-5.2)
Strongly disagree	18	2	(1.3-2.7)
Completed answers	1117	100	
No answer/incomplete	147		
Total	1264		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Icelandic politicians possess general superficial knowledge in many areas rather than specialist knowledge in fewer fields*

Table 29. Perceptions concerning journalists' general superficial knowledge

	N	%	95% CI
Strongly agree	219	20	(17.6-22.4)
Somewhat agree	451	41	(38.1-43.9)
Neither agree nor disagree	351	32	(29.3-34.7)
Somewhat disagree	69	6	(5.6,-7.4)
Strongly disagree	13	1	(0.4-1.6)
Completed answers	1103	100	
No answer/incomplete	160		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: *Icelandic journalists possess general superficial knowledge in many areas rather than specialist knowledge in fewer fields*

Overwhelmingly, 68% of respondents perceived Icelandic politicians to possess general superficial knowledge, whilst only 6% disagreed, and 26% did not have an opinion, as table 28 illustrates. Similarly, 61% of respondents perceived Icelandic journalists to possess general superficial knowledge, whilst 7% disagreed and 32% did not have an opinion as shown in table 29.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, almost all of the interviewees perceived both politicians and journalists to be generalists rather than specialists. Chapter 5 showed how the media coverage is seen as increasingly superficial and this was highlighted in relation to the Icelandic media market and commercialisation. The findings here show how the superficial coverage cannot simply be understood or explained from a macro structural perspective. If politicians and journalists are mostly generalists as opposed to specialists, then who is supposed to produce more in-depth specialised coverage? The findings here suggest that this is an issue of structure and actors.

A weak media, lack of journalistic initiative, superficial generalist knowledge, and less distance between elites and the public, were highlighted in the interviews concerning *the possibilities* for the public in Iceland to substantially influence political coverage, as well as the work of journalists and politicians more generally. In addition, it was stated that the public has become much more involved in protests and various grassroots movements following the financial crisis. This has often led to issues raised by the public and various interest groups being put on the political agenda and then covered by various media outlets. In this sense, political coverage has 'opened up' and become more critical. The watchdog role has, to some extent, moved from the journalists and the legacy media and over to the public, various special interest groups and 'opinion leaders', as mentioned in the previous chapter. Following the failures of politicians prior to the financial crisis, as laid out in the SIC report, the perception is that Icelanders are now more vocal if they want to raise a particular issue.

There is much less distance between the public and elites in Iceland than in larger states and this makes it easier for members of the public to quickly put issues on

the agenda, as many interviewees argued. This can happen through unofficial meetings or random encounters since elites are constantly interacting with members of the public. However, what was mentioned in almost all interviews as the most vital tool for the public to put issues on the agenda is social media, particularly Facebook. Possibilities for the agenda-setting role of the public are perceived to be much greater in a small state like Iceland than in a larger one. Important political discussions are now taking place online between journalist, politicians *and the public*, which are often completely bypassing the legacy media. The small state social ecology plays a key part in the online interactions, as will be examined in the following chapter.

Focusing here on political coverage in general, and not social media specifically, respondents were asked how much influence the public has on political coverage in the Icelandic media.

Table 30. Perceptions concerning the public's influence on political coverage

	N	%	95% CI
Very much influence	46	4	(2.9-5.1)
Fairly much influence	347	30	(27.3-32.7)
Neither much nor little influence	342	30	(27.4-32.6)
Fairly little influence	309	27	(24.4-29.6)
Very little influence	103	9	(7.3-10.7)
Completed answers	1147	100	
No answer/incomplete	106		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked: *In your opinion, how much or how little influence does the general public have on the political coverage in the Icelandic media?*

Despite legacy media outlets in general often being seen as top-down and isolated when it comes to the production of political coverage, 34% of Icelanders perceived the public to have very much or fairly much influence on political coverage, as table 30 illustrates. An almost identical number, 36%, perceived the public to have fairly little or very little influence. A further 30% perceived the influence to be neither much nor little. A substantial proportion of the population seemed to agree with the top-down perception, but it is also apparent that many Icelanders do see the public as active participants in political coverage in the media.

As outlined in chapter 4, the purpose of the survey was not simply to triangulate the data, but also to gauge the extent to which the public *interacts* with journalists and politicians. Respondents were asked if they had been in contact with an MP, local politician, or journalist in the past three years. Here it was specifically noted that this referred to contact that focused on the person's job.

Table 31. People's professional contact with politicians and journalists

	N	%	95% CI
Been in contact with an MP once	81	7	(5.3-8.7)
Been in contact with an MP more than once	93	8	(6.5-9.5)
Been in contact with a local politician once	70	6	(4.8-7.2)
Been in contact with a local politician more than once	104	9	(7.5-10.5)
Been in contact with a journalist once	46	4	(2.9-5.1)
Been in contact with a journalist more than once	58	5	(3.9-6.1)

Respondents were asked: *Have you ever in the past three years got in contact with a politician (MP or government minister), local politician, and/or a journalist because of a particular issue you wanted to discuss that was related to his or her job? Please mark all relevant answers*

As seen in table 31, 15% of respondents had been in contact with an MP once or more than once in the past three years, 15% had been in contact with a local political once or more than once, whilst 9% had been in contact with a journalist once or more than once. Even though this is not a majority of the population, it is still important to emphasise that a sizeable minority of the public had been in direct contact with these people, specifically in relation to their jobs. What the following chapter illustrates is that, *in addition*, there are substantial online interactions between elites and the public, which are difficult to separate into professional and non-professional dichotomies. Blurred boundaries and interactions between elites and the public (offline and online) illustrate that it is problematic to exclude the public from consideration when examining the politician-journalist relationship in Iceland, and who sets the agenda. This is in stark contrast to the existing political communication literature in this area which examines elites, but mostly ignores the public (e.g. Eriksson & Östman 2013; Van Aelst et al. 2010).

Elite mobility

A related and dominant theme from the interviews concerns elite mobility. Elites are not a stable category that can be examined as existing in isolation away from

the public in Iceland. Much of the focus here was again on how this is linked to the smallness of the society and how it makes journalists and the media weaker. A majority of the journalists mentioned how the small work environment often results in quick promotions and a good amount of responsibility early on. This can mean a lot of pressure and the salary in journalism in Iceland is very low. Lack of further career development, intense pressure and low pay were mentioned as key factors in people leaving journalism jobs for better-paid work. This development keeps getting worse with an increasingly difficult media landscape. Many senior journalists have left their jobs for a career in public relations, and less experienced ones have taken their place. This phenomenon has intensified in recent years following the financial crisis (Jónsdóttir et al. 2018). The fact that this saves money for struggling media outlets was mentioned in many interviews. Increasingly mobile journalists can be seen as yet another factor that results in politicians being more in control in the journalist-politician relationship as perceived by many journalists. As one of them (interview 5) stated:

> We are losing a lot of experienced people. You know people are always gaining the necessary experience with time but then they just take it with them somewhere else. And this can be very dangerous. You always have new and inexperienced people who are covering the most important topics. It is very important that we gain experience and build knowledge in the media so we can deal with all that is taking place you know.

This again was commonly discussed in relation to the watchdog role of the media. How are people supposed to be critical about complicated and important matters if they are uninformed about the topics, as well as inexperienced? A majority of the journalists said that most journalists in Iceland only work in the field for a short amount of time. It is common for university students to apply to work in journalism over the summer months to gain experience and make connections. Subsequently, the young journalists might work in the field for a year or two. It was stated in several interviews that this could make these journalists less critical. Again, this was linked to the smallness of the society. If you see yourself, for example, working as a lawyer or in the financial sector in the future, you might not want people in the field to remember a bad experience linked to you covering them critically or 'unfairly' in the media. Many journalists probably often ask

themselves what line of work they will go into after journalism and this can have an impact on the coverage and make it slightly less critical. As one journalist (interview 10) stated:

> I have heard of some cases where journalists who used to work for a critical media outlet went to work somewhere else and there they met someone they have written about. Fairly but critically. And these journalists have ended up in very uncomfortable positions where these individuals later had power over them.[60]

Moreover, it was stated that it can also be difficult to move between different media outlets if you have been critical, since many of them are owned by special interest groups and businesses. In this way your capital can decrease within the journalism field if you make 'enemies'. To some extent, this angle of the Icelandic case is similar to what has been found in research focused on local journalism in other settings. Local media is usually deeply connected to businesses in the community, and this can make it difficult for local journalists to be critical (e.g. Rotmeijer 2018).

It was clear from the interviews that journalism in Iceland is not necessarily viewed as a profession but sometimes more as a transition into something else. When asked if they saw themselves being in journalism for the rest of their career, most of the journalists were not willing to commit to that. As one journalist (interview 39) said succinctly: 'Most journalists see the job simply as a stepping stone before going into something else.' A majority of both journalists and politicians contrasted this with journalism in larger states where it has been viewed more as a profession. In relation to this, it is worth bearing in mind that professionalism in journalism started to develop later in Iceland than in many countries, including the four Nordic countries Iceland is often grouped with. Moreover, formal education in journalism is not nearly as common in the Icelandic media as it is in the other Nordic countries. A quarter of Icelandic

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[60] And another journalist (interview 6) said: 'If you think that in the future you might be working for the person you are about to interview, or in their field, it must be the case that this can have some impact on how you approach the interview.'

journalists have a formal degree in journalism or media studies, compared to 56% in Finland, 64% in Norway, 68% in Sweden and 82% in Denmark (Worlds of Journalism 2016).

Mobility is high in journalism, but this has also been the case in the Icelandic parliament. As one politician (interview 30) said: 'Probably the only work place that has higher turnover rates than the Icelandic media is the Icelandic parliament (laughs).' This development has increased after the financial crisis. On average from 1934-2016 the percentage of new MPs in the Icelandic parliament after each election has been 29.7%. In the first election after the crisis in 2009, the percentage of new MPs was 42.9% (the first time it had gone over 40%) and it was the exact same figure four years later in 2013. In the election in 2016 following the Panama Papers scandal, the number of new MPs was 50.8% (Alþingi 2017, p. 187).

Many politicians and journalists expressed concern about the very high mobility in Icelandic politics, particularly following the financial crisis. It was noted that women often do not last long and that experience is not valued as much as it used to be. In some ways many now seem to look down on it and link it to some sort of corruption. Similar to the journalists, most of the politicians interviewed did not necessarily plan for politics to be their main career with many noting (and laughing) that it is difficult to make long term plans in Icelandic politics and most said that they would take it 'one election at a time'.

Several of the more experienced MPs mentioned that they often felt the need to spend some time explaining the context of certain political issues to younger and inexperienced journalists. This could be seen as highly problematic if the journalists only spoke to one senior politician and this was often apparent in certain news stories. The lack of 'institutional memory' was discussed as a big problem both in the Icelandic media but also the political sphere. Newer MPs often lack knowledge of the context just as much as the journalists do. This was noted as particularly problematic in relation to the fact that Icelandic politicians need to rely heavily on outside input from relevant 'experts' when grappling with

complicated issues they might not know much about (as noted previously, most do not have any members of staff). This means that it can be difficult to separate objective input and lobbyists with a particular agenda. Again, this was associated with the superficial political discourse in Iceland often on display in the media.

As illustrated in this section, it was a dominant theme in the interviews that resource constraints seriously impact Icelandic journalists' possibilities for in-depth specialist reporting focused on politics. This was seen by many journalists to give more power to politicians when it comes to political coverage. As is a common theme in this chapter, this was seen to impair the possibility for the media to be a watchdog on those in political power. What was, however, also apparent is that politicians are grappling with resource constraints in their everyday work environment and this can limit their dominance. Journalists and politicians are both seen to be mobile generalists and this has an impact on political coverage and politics itself.

Public perceptions seem to mostly echo elite views when it comes to the dominance in the relationship and generalist knowledge. The public is, moreover, seen as an active participant when it comes to political coverage, as will be investigated in more detail in the following chapter. This was discussed in relation to the fact that the public is much closer to elites than in larger states and, moreover, the weakness of the legacy media creates a vacuum that can be filled by 'outside' voices. It is therefore not simply the case that powerful politicians are dictating political coverage in a small state with a weak media. The picture is more complicated.

6.3. More distance and less professional interactions

This final section engages with the findings already outlined and illustrates how there are increasingly less daily work-related interactions and more professional distance between journalists and politicians in Iceland. This is also linked to the discussion in the previous chapter concerning superficial political coverage and commercialisation with regard to the small media market. Icelandic journalists

and politicians do not communicate much with each other within private sphere elite networks like in larger countries. What does this mean for their relationship and political coverage?

The more senior politicians and journalists highlighted the fact that the number of journalists permanently based in the Icelandic parliament has shrunk drastically since the crisis, and now there is only one journalist from *RÚV* who is permanently based there, as opposed to several journalists before the crisis. All of them perceived this to be a negative development. First, it puts too much agenda-setting power in the hands of a single journalist. Sometimes other journalists are reporting in the parliament and the politicians noted how it was clear that the journalists often had a different take on what was the main news story and this therefore increased the variety of news coming from the parliament. Having more journalists permanently working in the parliament would probably make the reporting better in the long run. The competition would be good for *RÚV* and more journalists would be reporting on more varied topics.

Second, by being permanently based in the parliament, the journalists would be able to access more in-depth information about politics, better understand the proceedings and the wider context, and get to know the politicians from a more professional perspective. It was noted that this could potentially result in less superficial coverage by, for example, focusing more on the substantive committee work, which is mostly absent from political coverage. It was noted that it can be much easier for politicians to spin stories over the phone and online and this often leads to inaccurate stories which can be completely framed the way the politician wants. As one journalist (interview 6) stated:

> If you are not in the parliament, you do not hear what is being whispered, you cannot read the body language, and you do not see which people are spending time together. You miss a lot if you are just sitting at your desk or watching the speeches on television.

A more regular presence of journalists in the parliament could result in more intense working relationships that echo what Davis (2010) has found in Westminster. It could also make the Icelandic parliament more similar to the

other Nordic countries. For example, according to Dindler (2015), there were 180 journalists who had parliament as their work base in Denmark at the time of her study. She found, similarly to Davis in the United Kingdom, that journalists indirectly influence politics via the exchange of political intelligence with political actors. Van Aelst et al. (2010) showed that 74% of MPs in Norway were in contact with 'political journalists' several times a week, or daily, and the comparable number in Denmark was 92%. This is drastically different from the Icelandic case. The interviews revealed that, whilst government ministers and party leaders were often in daily contact with journalists, regular MPs said that they might speak to a journalist once or twice a week, and many said that they only speak to journalists once or twice a month.

The number of journalists in the Icelandic parliament would always be very small in comparison to the other Nordic countries, but more journalists there could add depth to the coverage according to a majority of the interviewees. As it stands now, the little professional interaction journalists have with politicians often means that the journalists lack a basic understanding of what is going on. The journalists and politicians might know each other from school or through mutual friends, as previously outlined in relation to the sociology of size, but this is not a substitute for a professional relationship, according to a majority of the interviewees. And, as discussed previously, these prior connections can in fact problematise political coverage and make it more difficult for journalists to be critical and impartial.

Interestingly, none of the interviewees seemed to be concerned that more journalists in the parliament could result in journalists and politicians becoming too close, as has been highlighted as a potential problem in larger states (e.g. Van Aelst & Aalberg 2011). Journalists and politicians in larger states are seen to interact in an isolated private 'microcosm' (Schudson 2008) where there is too much professional closeness. This has been shown to lead to very narrow viewpoints, mainly from those government and parliamentary sources that the journalists interact with on a daily basis. This can limit public debates due to a lack of alternative viewpoints, and this can therefore diminish plural democratic

debates. The fact that *not a single interviewee* could see increased professional proximity as a potential problem, sheds, perhaps, further light on the fact the people are already deeply connected in multiple role relationships in Iceland.

The more senior politicians and journalists observed that the decline of the party press, and more recently the lack of resources, has in general resulted in much more distance and less daily work-related interactions with journalists. Here it is important to note how the commercialisation of the small media market (discussed earlier in the thesis) is seen to not only impact political news *content* but also the *working relationship* between journalists and politicians.

The smallness of the society is a key factor here. Even when the media outlets had more resources, there were still only a few journalists in the parliament (5 or 6 journalists as many interviewees mentioned). The intense institutionalised private sphere type of relationship illustrated by Davis (2010) has *never* really been a possibility in a small state with blurred boundaries, a different social ecology and small media market. But now, because of changes in the media environment, the offline daily professional relationship between politicians and journalists has become *even more distant*.

According to the senior politicians and journalists, this means that the political coverage is more superficial than it used to be and often lacking the necessary context. Also, there is increasing pressure for 'instant responses', which contributes to this problem. Sometimes issues need a few days to be investigated, but this does not work well in the current climate, particularly not in a small media market. As one of the senior journalists (interview 48) said:

> It used to be the case that maybe half of the news broadcast was about something from the parliament, and you could follow up on the news stories, but now there is much less coverage from the parliament and less time for journalists to spend time looking into issues, initiating the coverage and continuing with the stories.

Put simply, there is less time for the media to *monitor* those in power, and this therefore diminishes the watchdog role. It is difficult to hold powerful individuals

to account if you do not know what they are doing. Again, the difference between the *routine* coverage and the more atypical moments was highlighted. Many interviewees mentioned that the media often does a good job when big events take place, such as the Panama Papers scandal. Then the parliament filled up with journalists for a few days, with much quality coverage being produced. But this was discussed in terms of being good short-term coverage. On a more routine day in the parliament, the journalists are usually not there for a sufficient amount of time (apart from one journalist from *RÚV*) to monitor what is going on.

According to a majority of the politicians interviewed, it is common during these routine periods that there is no follow up on interviews and a politician might speak to several different journalists (usually over the phone or sometimes on Facebook Messenger) from the same media outlet about the same issue. As one politician (interview 26) said:

> There is much less continuity than there used to be. I sometimes need to explain the context of the story several times to new journalists and sometimes these journalists do not know much about politics.

Many of the journalists who cover politics, especially for the main online news sites, mentioned that they hardly ever meet the politicians they are covering unless there is a big news story. They simply turn on the television, watch the main slots in the parliamentary chamber, and write down interesting quotes from the speeches they think will get clicks. Often they will follow this up with a phone conversation but will hardly ever meet the politicians for interviews to give the story some context.

For those working on television and on the radio, the working relationship is somewhat different. The journalists often meet MPs and government ministers to interview them and then they briefly talk to them before and after the interviews. But these are usually quite brief conversations and subsequently the journalists need to rush off to finish their stories. The interactions are often quite

informal and journalists might send politicians text messages or messages on Facebook, as discussed in more detail the next chapter.[61]

Even though these relations are very informal, they are not intense or institutionalised in the same way that Dindler (2015) and Davis (2010) have found in Denmark and the United Kingdom. It can be problematic when the journalists become too involved in the political sphere, but the complete opposite appears to be the case in Iceland. The Icelandic journalists are mainly mobile generalists. This means that, in the Icelandic context, the common term 'political journalist' used in political communication research does not necessarily make sense (e.g. Albæk et al. 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2010). Although there are certain journalists who mainly cover politics, others might cover politics one day, and then a dog show, someone turning 105 years old in a nursing home, or something else completely unrelated the following day.

What this means is that the journalists do not possess the relevant political knowledge that could make them key actors in the social construction of politics within private sphere networks. As previously outlined, the relationship between journalists and politicians in Iceland can be close, but this is often linked to the small state social ecology and multiple role relationships, rather than particular professional private sphere networks. Journalists and politicians often run into each other at the supermarket or the swimming pool and this can lead to some brief political discussions, but these conversations are sporadic and lacking in depth. The less intense professional interactions, and more complex and deep personal connections, can both contribute to problematic political coverage. The journalists might not know much about the topic and furthermore might be less willing to ask relevant critical questions.[62]

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[61] As one of the television reporters (interview 3) stated when talking about contacting government ministers: 'That is a completely acceptable way of contacting them. We are allowed to do that and they don't get angry. That is just a part of how we communicate with them. To just contact them directly like that.'

[62] It was frequently mentioned in the interviews that what is happening in Iceland is of course also taking place in other countries, but this was often accompanied by examples of there still being much more in-depth coverage and specialisation in the larger states. Many interviewees noted that it is of course difficult to generalise about all media outlets, and the same can be said about politicians and journalists. Some politicians interact a lot with specific journalists, and this

A comparative study carried out by Van Aelst and Aalberg (2011) reveals key differences when Iceland is added to the comparison. They conducted a survey amongst 'political journalists' and members of parliament in Belgium, Norway and Sweden. These three countries would all be defined as small in the international relations literature, as shown in chapter 2. One of the key findings of the study was that the relationship is more formal than informal in all the countries. A minority would meet someone from the other side for lunch at least once a month, a minority considers members of the other group as friends and only a very small minority asks the other side for advice about work. The interview material from Iceland shows to some extent the complete opposite picture. The relationship is often very informal, and interactions routinely take place by chance in unofficial settings outside of the work environment.

Interestingly, research on municipal officials and journalists in Sweden reveals similarities with findings presented in this chapter. In his comparative study of seven towns and municipalities in Sweden (one of which had a larger population than the whole of Iceland), Larsson (2002) found that journalists and politicians knew each other very well and some had been associated with each other for a long time. Moreover the study revealed a lack of journalistic initiative and this was linked to difficult working conditions of journalists that seldom allowed independent inquiry and agenda building. This is also the case in Iceland, except here this is on the national level.

Conclusions

Building on the foundation laid out earlier concerning the perceived impact the small commercialised media market has on routine political coverage, this chapter has extended the smallness variable to socio-cultural aspects concerning the relationship between journalists, politicians and the public. I argue that this deepens the understanding of the perceived reasons behind superficial political

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was often linked to particular political parties and media outlets. Some journalists produce great journalism pieces and ask tough questions. But the dominant overall themes have been highlighted.

coverage in Iceland, and highlights further challenges as regards the ideal democratic roles of the media.

The chapter showed how the small state social ecology can potentially make it more difficult for journalists to be impartial and critical when covering politics. Multiple role relationships mean that there can be several different connections between people. It can be challenging for the watchdog to bark if he is too close to those he should be watching. At the same time, it was highlighted how 'short chains of command' can make it easier to access people and information. This can, however, sometimes be quite irrelevant if journalists do not know what they are looking for, or do not have the time to look for it. Interviewees emphasised how politicians and journalists are mainly mobile generalists and their working conditions make it difficult for them to become specialists. It can be challenging to produce in-depth material if you do not know the topic you are covering.

As was the case in the previous chapter, public attitudes echo, to an extent, perceptions from interviewees. There is much less distance between the public and elites in Iceland than in larger states and this makes it easier for the average citizen to quickly put issues on the agenda, as many interviewees argued. This can happen through unofficial meetings or random encounters since elites are constantly interacting with members of the public. This led to many interviewees arguing that the legacy media is not the central mediator between elites and citizens, as often seems to be assumed in the wider academic literature from the larger states. As the subsequent chapter shows, another mediator is seen to be much more important nowadays in Iceland.

Where, then, does this leave us? The findings in this chapter highlighted elements that are unique to Iceland in relation to specific media outlets and the parliament. This is important since this type of study has not been carried out in Iceland and the chapter therefore adds another case to the journalist-source literature. However, the chapter has also *expanded* the framework used to understand journalist-politician relations on the national level. As discussed at the start, existing journalist-source foundations, built on the dichotomies between public

and private networks as well as professional and non-professional settings, need to be reconfigured to examine the Icelandic case. To do this, the chapter has brought, alongside the empirical material, the literature from the sociology of size, public administration and governance.[63] It has been shown that there is a need to expand existing frameworks by a) moving the study away from private spheres to the wider society and social relations and, b) including the public in the study.

Existing research has shown how professional closeness can create problems concerning impartiality and critical coverage. In Iceland, it is the *social closeness* that needs to be examined more closely At the same time, the relationship between politicians and journalists cannot be examined in isolation concerning the social construction of politics, as has been done in the larger states. Chapter 8 follows up on this discussion by merging elements from relevant findings in the thesis to construct an exploratory conceptual framework for small state political communication dynamics. The aim is for this framework to help guide future research on small states in this area.

As the chapter has hinted at several times, the relationship between journalists, politicians and the public cannot be fully examined offline. The next chapter therefore moves to the online small state ecology. As previously outlined, Iceland appears to be an ideal case study for interactions and debates to thrive online due to its small, homogenous, educated, politically engaged and relatively equal population, as well as virtually 100% internet penetration. The Icelandic case seems to suggest that elites and the public interact online in different ways than in the larger states and that there is a genuine discussion and flow of ideas. But the story is more complicated and potentially raises alarm bells for other societies, large and small.

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[63] This literature was outlined in more detail in chapter 2.

CHAPTER 7:
'Everybody knows everybody' (on Facebook) –
Public and private interactions in a two-level online sphere

This chapter expands the analysis to the online world. Its aim is to examine *how social networking sites are perceived to have impacted routine political coverage and interactions between politicians, journalists and the public in Iceland*. In so doing, it engages with the fifth and final research question set out at the beginning of the thesis. As illustrated earlier, the Icelandic legacy media is perceived to be breaking down and thus unable to fulfil its democratic roles of holding those in power to account, staging an open and plural debate, and representing people to authority (Curran 2002). The politician-journalist relationship in Iceland complicates matters further and adds to the superficiality and lack of criticism. Social closeness, related to small state ecology (Sarapuu 2010), in addition to increased professional distance, means that it is challenging for journalists to fulfil their watchdog role. So, if the legacy media is not able to fulfil its democratic roles, then where do we turn for a possible saviour?

Social networking sites have been seen as a possible mediating sphere for holding those in power to account and staging plural debates. Chapter 3 illustrated how discussions concerning the democratic potential of the internet can, in simple terms, be defined in relation to 'techno-optimism' and 'techno-pessimism'. On the optimist side, debates have, for example, focused on how social networking sites have broken down barriers between politicians and citizens (e.g. Lilleker et al. 2011). This can be seen to enhance democracy. One of the most well-documented causes for citizen's disconnection from politics is the view that they have no say in political affairs because there is little dialogue with politicians. 'The possibility of two-way interaction between citizens and political actors is, thus, seen as a major step towards re-establishing democratic accountability and facilitating public participation' (Theocharis et al. 2016, p. 1011). The internet, and social networking sites in particular, have been seen to facilitate *open public debates*, and to make it easier for people to talk *directly* to their representatives, and vice versa. If there are open channels for people to see and participate in, surely this makes it easier to hold those in power to account?

The argument against the internet enhancing democracy is commonly made in relation to wider societal inequalities. This can be linked to the 'normalisation hypothesis', which focuses on how 'patterns of socioeconomic and political relationships on-line come to resemble those of the real world' (Margolis et al. 1999, p. 26). In other words, existing power relations are present online similarly to how they are offline. Research has, for example, shown that the more educated and well-off you are, the more likely you are to use the internet for political activities. Also, political interest and offline engagement with political issues has been shown to be linked to more political activity online (e.g. Wojcik & Hughes 2019; Smith 2013; Gustafsson 2012). Furthermore, access to the internet is much higher in richer countries than the developing world and there are also digital divides within western democracies (e.g. Fuchs 2014). It is difficult to argue that the internet enhances democracy if people do not have access to it.

What most of the existing empirical studies on politicians' behaviour on social networking sites reveal is that they interact infrequently with other users. Politicians are quite conservative and tend to adopt a one-way 'broadcasting style' (e.g. Kruikemeier 2014; Graham et al. 2013; Jackson & Lilleker 2011). Recent research has revealed a status quo in online campaigning since 'politicians mostly replicated traditional messages and campaign modes on their Web presences while limiting engagement with users' (Stier et al. 2018, p. 51). This suggests a much stronger case for normalisation as opposed to the democracy-enhancing, two-way interaction argument. Succinctly put, existing research has shown continued top-down communication and limited interaction between politicians and citizens.

This chapter makes an intervention into these outlined academic debates in two key ways. First, it is shown that the literature has overlooked a particular type of case that opens up new areas of investigation. Iceland is an ideal case to counter the more pessimist perspective. It is difficult to argue that a digital divide exists in Iceland, as the society is highly educated, it is much more equal in comparison to the larger western democracies usually studied, political engagement is high, and internet usage is virtually 100% (Eurostat 2019; OECD 2017). Furthermore,

the country is very small, and, as shown previously, there is much more closeness between elites and the public than in the larger states. In other words, Iceland is to an extent the opposite of the larger states usually studied. Offline structures and relationships are not unequal and distant, but rather much more equal and close. Following the 'offline and online structures are similar' line, it can therefore be argued that if there is a particular case where the internet can truly work as a type of public sphere when it comes to *participation* and *access*, then Iceland is it.

Second, the Icelandic case illustrates that too much emphasis has been placed on the *public* aspect of online engagement. Research on the internet and social media in relation to political communication has mainly focused on publicly available digital trace data and missed the more semi-public and *private* engagements that take place (Dennis 2019). It is shown that this is problematic, and the Icelandic case is used to help fill a research gap. Based on the findings, I argue that it is necessary to construct an online public-private dichotomy framework in order to understand different types of political engagement. I refer to this as a 'two-level online sphere'.

The present chapter is in three main sections. The first section focuses on the public aspects of social networking sites and illustrates how politicians and journalists in Iceland perceive this digital arena to have impacted political debates and political coverage in the legacy media. In the interviews, it quickly became clear that, when talking about social media, most people were mainly referring to Facebook. This is not surprising, since it is by far the most dominant social network in Iceland. It is perceived by many to have 'opened up' the political debate in the small state. Perceptions from journalists and politicians are both positive and negative in this regard, as are those of the public.

The second section examines how politicians and journalists use Facebook publicly and how they interact with citizens on the network. Icelandic journalists are often frustrated with how politicians use the platform, and the findings are, to an extent, reminiscent of the one-way broadcast style findings previously outlined. Journalists perceive politicians to have a well thought out digital

strategy that often circumvents the legacy media. Politicians, however, have a very different assessment of their own Facebook usage. Most mainly use their personal profiles where everything becomes 'mixed up', and they do not have a particular strategy with how they use social media.

The third and final section focuses on the more private online behaviour. What became apparent in the interviews is that Icelandic journalists and politicians communicate extensively on Facebook Messenger. It appears to be the space where much of the actual political communication engagement takes place, decisions are made, interviews are conducted and so on. And it is shown how the public is an active participant in this setting. Like the previous two chapters, this one uses relevant material from the 50 interviews with Icelandic journalists and politicians, and questions from the survey sent to a representative sample of 2000 Icelanders (63% response rate).

7.1. Debate has 'opened up' with active participation from the public?

This section explores dominant themes from the interviews concerning the possible impact that social networking sites, mainly Facebook, have had on political debates in Iceland. This was frequently discussed in relation to the effect the social network has on political coverage in the legacy media. Perceptions are that Facebook has 'opened up' the debate and that the public can more quickly and easily put issues on the national agenda than before. This was discussed in relation to a weak legacy media that has much less agenda-setting power than it used to have.

Politicians and journalists often perceive online debates as being superficial and negative. The reasoning here is that people have already made up their minds and are simply talking *at each other* rather than engaging in a meaningful debate. The survey answers suggest that the public in Iceland is both positive and negative towards social media when it comes to its impact on debates about politics. A majority of people say that social media has made people more informed about politics but also that social media has not led to constructive

debates. Only a small percentage of the population actively *participates* in public debates on social media concerning politics, but a much larger percentage *notices* them 'very much' or 'fairly much'.

The 'Facebook effect' on politics and media in Iceland

According to an Icelandic survey from 2018, a total of 93% of Icelanders use Facebook regularly (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2018). As discussed in chapter 3, most of the academic research on social media and politics has been focused on Twitter (during election campaigns), not Facebook (Jungherr 2016). Twitter is not particularly popular in Iceland when compared to Facebook. Only 17% use it regularly (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2018). So, when comparing the regular usage of 93% versus 17%, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that Facebook was dominant in the interview answers. Most of the population use the network regularly and so it was perceived to be by far the most important social media platform. This was the case both with journalists and politicians.

A recent study in Iceland points in a similar direction. Guðmundsson (2019) surveyed candidates in the 2016 and 2017 Icelandic parliamentary elections and asked them how they used various media outlets and how they perceived the different outlets' importance. He found that 94% of the candidates used Facebook during the election campaign, and 95% of those surveyed found Facebook to be 'important or very important' for political communication in Iceland. Facebook was perceived to be more important than *all other outlets*. For example, 91% found the online news sites to be important, 86% said the same for television and 77% for radio.

As mentioned, it has been common in the literature on the internet and democracy to highlight a digital divide, since not everyone has access to the internet. This is a problematic argument to make in Iceland. It has been shown to be the only country in the world with 100% internet penetration (Internet World Stats 2017), and according to the most recent figures from Eurostat, Iceland has the highest percentage of internet use in Europe, with 99% of the population between the ages of 16 to 74 using the internet regularly (Eurostat 2019). So,

almost all Icelanders use the internet regularly, and 93% of them use Facebook regularly. The social network can be seen as a type of 'mundane internet tool' (Nielsen 2011) in the country. This context is important for the analysis here. Most people use Facebook every day for all sorts of purposes, and this includes engaging with political issues.

It was almost a unanimous assessment amongst the journalists that Facebook has 'opened up' the political discussion in Iceland. As one journalist (interview 5) put it succinctly: 'Whoever wants to can now basically say what they want on Facebook about any matter they are interested in.' Similar answers were repeated in most interviews. As another journalist (interview 31) phrased it:

> Social media has made the discussion wide open and access to information is much more easily available than it was before. Social media has changed everything. The debate has now opened up and politicians have to participate in it.

The spread of news and political information is perceived to be much more instantaneous than it was before. As another journalist (interview 35) said: 'Political stories change and evolve much quicker than they did before social media.' Almost everyone uses Facebook and if a particular story gains traction, it will become dominant in the discourse very quickly. This means that Icelandic politicians can be 'less in control' of how stories develop than they were before the social media age, according to most of the journalists. As one of them (interview 36) said: 'The comments sections and social media in general have had a lot of impact. News stories can blow up very quickly.'

An overwhelming majority of the politicians interviewed stated similarly that there is much more political debate 'out in the open' than before. As one (interview 21) stated: 'Social media has had a very positive but also demanding impact. The debate that used to take place in workplaces and in cafes has now moved to this open space and the conversation never ends.'[64] What was a common theme throughout the interviews with both journalists and politicians

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[64] Another politician (interview 13) said: 'The online news sites get news from Facebook. Some of it is quite stupid, but there is also lots of useful information to be found on social media.'

was the assessment that debates about politics on social media (the 'wide open debates' according to many interviewees) get more space in the legacy media than is perhaps the case in other larger countries, because the media is perceived to be so small and weak in Iceland, as outlined earlier in the thesis. Material on social media is quick, convenient and cheap for overworked journalists to use as (often the only) source material for their news reports.

Many interviewees stated that this has created a platform for the public to more easily put issues on the agenda and to have an impact on political coverage, as well as politics itself. This was seen as both a positive and negative development in relation to democratic debates: positive in the sense that the public can more easily be actively engaged, but negative in that the legacy media is often broadcasting material from social media somewhat unfiltered. This was often discussed in relation to the lack of gatekeeping by overworked and inexperienced journalists. What is picked up from social media into news reports can be something genuinely important, but it can just as easily be something from a special interest group aiming to dictate political coverage in the legacy media through strategically initiating it on social media.

Examples were frequently mentioned when discussing how political debates on social media have had an impact on how political stories develop. The one that most interviewees discussed concerned the Panama Papers. After a critical interview with the Icelandic prime minister appeared on the current affairs show *Kastljós*, Facebook in Iceland 'lit up', and large-scale protests were organised for the very next day. The prime minister resigned shortly after. As many interviewees pointed out, ministers in Iceland do not usually resign, even if they are linked to some scandal. Several of the journalists used the Scandinavian countries as a contrasting example. If this had happened in Denmark there would not have been a need for the protests but in Iceland there was a need for the protests to gauge public opinion. After that the politicians in the coalition parties did what they thought they had to do, and the prime minister was under pressure to resign. This was not just because of the protests, but they played an important role. As one journalist (interview 4) said:

> If there had been no media coverage, the protests would not have taken place, and he would not have resigned. That is what I believe. If the media coverage had been the same, but there had not been any protests on social media and outside the parliament, he would not have resigned.

Social media had been seen as one key part in how the story developed with the quick organisation of the protests following the interview on television. It was also mentioned that this had been the case with several other protests that took place in Iceland following the collapse of the Icelandic banks, such as the 'pots and pans' protests and when the Icelandic public rose up in the 'Icesave dispute' between the United Kingdom and the Netherlands in 2010 and 2011. This follows up on the discussion in chapter 5 focusing on how attitudes in Iceland became much more critical following the crisis. Citizens, politicians and various groups and organisations initiated criticism, often through social media, and this was routinely covered in the legacy media.

The themes mentioned here regarding open and participatory debates and the impact they can have on politics echo to some extent the cyber-optimist arguments previously discussed. The answers emphasising the role of social media in organising the protests are similar to those that were dominant in relation to the Arab Spring and other large events (e.g. Eltantawy & Wiest 2011). Social media is perceived to play a key role in determining how political issues have developed in Iceland. What was not framed positively in the answers in relation to democracy was how interviewees discussed this in relation to a weak legacy media and lack of professionalism in journalism, as explored previously in the thesis. Social media can have such a big impact in Iceland because the legacy media has opened up a space for it. The space has opened up partly because the legacy media is not adequately fulfilling its democratic roles as a watchdog and a sphere that enables debates on important issues to take place.

The somewhat positive discourse, usually discussed in relation to Facebook and the 'opening up' of debates, was commonly just the first part of the answers from journalists and politicians when they were asked about social media and politics.

Most of the initial positive answers were followed by some sort of 'but' and then *a much longer* discussion concerning the negative assessment of social media and its impact on politics and political coverage.

Nonsense, negativity and contribution to the superficial coverage

The negative side of opening up the political debate for all was summed up succinctly by one of the journalists (interview 2): 'The availability of nonsense is much higher than it was before.' This sentiment was echoed in a large majority of the interviews. There are no gatekeepers that sift through the material on social media. Journalists and politicians perceive the public to be active in fact checking news coverage from the legacy media on social media, and often pointing out problems or mistakes in the reporting. This was seen as a mostly positive development in the interviews. However, the lack of fact-checking information that *originates* on social media leads to a chaotic environment and contributes to the 'he said/she said' superficial political coverage in the legacy media (outlined in previous chapters). Material that should have been fact checked more carefully routinely finds its way into the legacy media and mainstream discourse straight from Facebook. As one politician (interview 23) summed it up:

> Some of the media outlets are so weak now, so their news reports are very often focused on just what some man downtown thinks about a particular issue and his criticism of this issue on Facebook. The idea of social media is charming and nice, but what we clearly see on there is much more opinion-based material and much less fact-based. And there is less and less distinction between what is opinion and what is fact. In this regard, the impact of social media on politics and news has been very negative. But the positive side is that more people can express their opinions than before.

This 'more opinion, less fact' theme was repeated in a majority of the interviews. It is worth noting here that most of the interviews were conducted when the term 'fake news' was starting to appear more regularly in the mainstream discourse and some of the interviewees mentioned the term in relation to this theme, along

with misinformation and disinformation. This was especially the case in the interviews that were conducted in the latter half of 2017.[65]

What a majority of the journalists and politicians also mentioned as a negative aspect of Facebook in Iceland is the tendency for one story, often a trivial matter, to completely 'blow up' and become the main issue for at least 24-hours, pushing other more important matters aside. Something 'catchy' and 'exciting' pops up, is instantly shared, and then is picked up by legacy media outlets. This was often linked to the superficiality themes explored in previous chapters. This sort of material from Facebook is a quick and easy information subsidy. This leads to even less emphasis on important policy matters and more emphasis on sensationalist stories that quickly disappear when the next one comes along. Examples were given of politicians saying something silly or rude at a gathering somewhere, and this subsequently being shared on Facebook. Or people arguing about something outrageous that a politician said in the parliament. Many journalists and politicians perceived this as one reason why people are becoming more disenchanted with politics, politicians in general and political coverage. There has been little trust in politics following the financial crisis, as illustrated earlier in the thesis, and these sorts of stories do not help, according to many interviewees.

Regarding political debates on Facebook, it was mentioned in a majority of interviews that these tend to be quite negative and that often these are not debates at all but rather people talking *at each other*, with most having already made up their minds. The politicians were especially negative when talking about debates concerning contentious issues on social media, particularly when those debates involved criticism of the politicians themselves. Trying to get your point across in these types of discussions can be very difficult, if not impossible. As one politician (interview 15) stated:

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[65] The news stories about Cambridge Analytica and voter information on Facebook had not surfaced when most of the interviews were conducted. Privacy was only mentioned briefly as a concern in a few interviews, but would perhaps be a more common theme if the interviews were conducted today.

I have not, I cannot name many examples where this type of communication led to something productive, in all honesty. Because usually when people go aggressively into these Facebook debates they are not going to change their mind. And I do not think it is a particularly good use of my time to write long explanations for some lone annoyed person. I just have not seen it work. So, I do not put much energy into that, no.

This theme was echoed in over two-thirds of the interviews with the politicians. As another politician (interview 21) put it:

If you try to engage in these types of debates that are about issues that make people angry, then you will not do anything else. The conversation never ends. People feel the need to constantly make the same point again and again. When are you supposed to stop answering if you go in there in the first place if the conversation never ends?'[66]

As stated earlier, research has shown that politicians are quite conservative in how they behave on social media and that they have tended to adopt a one-way broadcasting style and limited engagement with users (e.g. Baxter & Marcella 2012). Recent research has shown that this is not necessarily because they do not want to participate in discussion, but also because citizens are often uncivil in these settings (Theocharis et al. 2016), and it can be difficult for constructive criticism 'to break through the hail of hostility and personal invectives' (Tromble 2018, p. 692). Most of the Icelandic politicians interviewed said that they have stopped participating in these types of 'hot topic debates', but they do interact in other settings, as will be discussed subsequently. Moreover, most of the journalists and politicians said that because these debates are sometimes so 'over the top', 'unfair' and often even 'abusive', that the criticism on Facebook is not necessarily taken particularly seriously. Politicians therefore do not spend much

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[66] Another politician (interview 14) said: 'Usually it just ends badly. So, it is most of time not a good thing. But then it is just something that makes you angry. And then you write something. Which you should never do. I think, when I have gotten myself into trouble, it is usually something I have written when I am furious.' The politicians who were slightly more positive mentioned that they sometimes answer not for the people who are participating in the discussions, but rather for those who are following them. They might learn something, even though the people who are participating are very 'rude'.

time worrying about opinion-based attacks and feel that there is less of a need to respond. By responding, they can give the criticism legitimacy and risk having their response *become* a news story, especially on the online legacy news sites. As discussed in chapter 5, these sites are much more likely to pick up these types of stories straight from social media.

It was noted in a majority of the interviews with both politicians and journalists that they perceive members of the public who actually participate in these debates to be quite a small group. Several of the female interviewees stated in relation to this that they felt that men were much more likely to participate in them. So what do the numbers say when it comes to citizen engagement? There were several similarities between the interviewee perceptions and answers from the public. As outlined in chapter 4, the survey questions were devised from themes that emerged from the interviews and from the relevant academic literature. The aim was to triangulate the data in Iceland and explore comparisons between interviewee perceptions and public perceptions, as well as to examine interactions between politicians, journalists and the public.

First, respondents were asked to what extent they notice debates about Icelandic politics on social media. The aim was to gauge how much people are in fact seeing political content. It has been noted that despite the democratic enhancement potential of the internet and social media, most people actually use the internet for entertainment purposes rather than engaging with politics (e.g. Anderson & Caumont 2014). It was, therefore, important to establish a baseline to see to what extent people really are noticing political debates in Iceland.

As table 32 shows,[67] 40% of respondents said that they notice the debates either very much or fairly much, whilst another 40% said that they notice them fairly little or very little. Twenty per cent said that they take neither much nor little

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[67] *Note*: The answers in all tables are reported after weighing. This is so they represent the Icelandic population. The total number of respondents can therefore slightly vary, depending on how answers are weighed for each question. Furthermore, percentages are rounded so they do not always add up exactly to 100.

notice. It is therefore clear that a sizeable percentage of the Icelandic population does in fact often see debates about politics take place on social media.

Table 32. The extent to which respondents notice political debates on social media

	N	%	95% CI
Very much	105	9	(7.4-10.6)
Fairly much	371	31	(28.4-33.6)
Neither much nor little	238	20	(17.7-22.3)
Fairly little	217	18	(15.8-20.2)
Very little	255	22	(19.7-24.3)
Completed answers	1186	100	
No answer/incomplete	78		
Total	1264		

Respondents were asked: *How much or how little do you notice debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media (for example Facebook and Twitter)?*

As illustrated previously, the discussion on the internet and democracy sometimes highlights demographic differences. I therefore decided to use a chi-square test on the data related to social media to see if there were differences between key variables. Using this test, the data showed that there was a significant statistical difference between groups when it comes to gender ($p <$ 0,05), household income ($p <$ 0,05), age ($p <$ 0,001), education ($p <$ 0,001) and political interest ($p <$ 0,001). The data suggests that men are more likely than women to notice political debates on social media, young people are more likely to notice them than older people, and those who are more educated are more likely to notice them than those less educated. Moreover, those who are politically interested are more likely to notice them than those less interested in politics, and those from the lower income households are most likely to notice them.

Following this, the questions switched emphasis away from *noticing* debates to *participating* in them. Respondents were asked to what extent they participate in debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media. The threshold of participation here was quite low, since the examples used were simply of sharing a news report on politics, or writing comments.

Table 33. The extent to which respondents participate in political debates

	N	%	95% CI
Very much	22	2	(1.2-2.8)
Fairly much	41	3	(2.0-4.0)
Neither much nor little	125	11	(9.3-12.7)
Fairly little	229	19	(16.8-21.2)
Very little	771	65	(62.3-67.7)
Completed answers	1188	100	
No answer/incomplete	75		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked: *How much or how little do you participate in debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media (for example by writing comments or sharing political news reports)?*

The results shown in table 33 were somewhat surprising at first. 'Only' 5% of the Icelandic population claim to participate very much or fairly much in debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media. As previously highlighted, this cannot be explained because of lack of access, since virtually 100% of the population has access to the internet. Also, as shown in chapter 2, the Icelandic population is politically engaged, and, as a result, people should be active in talking about politics online, since previous research has highlighted that politically engaged people are more active in politics online (e.g. Gustafsson 2012). The survey asked specifically about political interest. It found that 48% said that they were very interested or fairly interested in politics, but only 5% participate in online political debates very much or fairly much.

The findings echo perceptions from many interviews that only a small minority of the population actually participates in the discussions. Again, a chi-square test revealed a significant difference when it comes to gender ($p < 0,01$), with the data suggesting that men are more likely to participate in these debates than women. This fits with previously discussed perceptions from female interviewees. The test also found a significant difference between groups concerning political interest ($p < 0,001$). Unsurprisingly, those who are interested in politics are more likely to participate in online debates than those who are less interested. This is in line with previous findings illustrating how political interest can impact political engagement online, as mentioned earlier. When writing about these results now, they are not as surprising as they first appeared. As discussed subsequently, there are other ways to engage in political debates online. Semi-

public and private avenues, as well as the small state ecology, illustrate that the issue is much more nuanced than it appears here.

Table 34. Respondents' views on news and discussions concerning politics on social media

	N	%	95% CI
I like seeing lots of political discussions and news on social media	380	32	(29.3-34.7)
I am worn-out by how many political discussions and news I see on social media	222	19	(16.3-21.7)
I don't feel strongly about these posts one way or the other	526	49	(46.8-51.9)
Completed answers	1177	100	
No answer/incomplete	86		
Total	1263		

Respondents were asked: *Thinking about the discussions and news you see on social media about politics, which comes closest to your view?*

Respondents were subsequently asked about their views on seeing news and discussions on social media about politics, as shown in table 34. Nearly a third (32%) of respondents answered 'I like seeing lots of political discussion and news on social media'. Nineteen per cent answered 'I am worn-out by how many political discussion and news I see on social media', and around half of respondents, or 49%, answered 'I don't feel strongly about these posts one way or the other'. Here a chi-square test revealed a significant statistical difference based on left/right political views ($p < 0,001$), political interest ($p < 0,001$), education ($p < 0,001$), age ($p < 0,05$) and whether or not people are based in the Reykjavík area or the more rural parts of Iceland ($p < 0,01$). The data suggests that those who are more left-wing, politically interested, educated, and/or based in the Reykjavík area are more likely to enjoy seeing lots of political discussions and news on social media than those who are more right-wing leaning, less interested in politics, less educated, and/or based in the more rural countryside. Older people are more likely to enjoy seeing the debates than younger people.

The same question was asked to respondents in the United States in October 2016. There, only 20% of respondents said that they liked seeing lots of political discussions and news on social media (compared to 32% in Iceland), 37% said that they were worn-out by how many political discussions and news they saw on social media (compared to 19% in Iceland), and 41% did not have strong opinion on the matter (compared to 49% in Iceland). According to this, Icelanders are more positive than respondents in the United States. Here it needs to be taken

into account that the survey in the United States was administered at the height of the presidential campaign in 2016 (Duggan & Smith 2016). However, it is also worth noting that Icelandic voters voted twice in 2016. An open presidential election was held in June of that year and early parliamentary elections were called in October following the Panama Papers scandal. So, even though the survey was not taken at the height of a political campaign in Iceland, there had been a large amount of political discussion in the preceding months.

A majority of interviewees said that social media has 'opened up' the political debate, as previously highlighted. It is now much easier for anyone to participate, not just those in power who can usually get on the news. This can be linked back to the 'equalisation hypothesis'. This implies that the existing power elites' dominance has been maintained by their easier access to the top-down legacy media. The hypothesis is that the internet has allowed other political actors, such as new and smaller political parties, to bypass the traditional media and speak to voters in a more direct manner (Lilleker et al. 2011). In other words, it levels the playing field to an extent, and increases engagement. Overall, the interviewees were somewhat split on whether this 'opening up' of the discussion had been positive or negative; people are more informed because there is now more information available, whilst at the same time opinions receive far more emphasis than facts. In relation to these themes, respondents in the survey were therefore asked whether they perceived social media to have contributed to people being more or less informed about politics than before.

Table 35. Perceptions on whether social media has made people more or less informed about politics

	N	%	95% CI
Much more informed	115	10	(8.3-11.7)
More informed	477	41	(38.2-43.8)
Neither more nor less informed	423	36	(33.3-38.7)
Less informed	126	11	(9.2-12.8)
Much less informed	30	3	(2.1-3.9)
Completed answers	1171	100	
No answer/incomplete	90		
Total	1261		

Respondents were asked: *Some think that social media has contributed to people being more informed about politics in Iceland than before. Others think that social media has contributed to people being less informed about politics than before. On the whole, do you think that social media has contributed to people being more or less informed about politics in Iceland than before?*

As shown in table 35, 51% of the Icelandic population believe that social media has made people more informed about politics in Iceland, whilst only 14% think that it has made people less informed. A little over a third (36%) perceive social media to have made people neither more nor less informed. So, of those who felt that it had either made people more or less informed, over three times as many (51% vs. 14%) answered that social media had made people more informed about politics. This echoes the positive themes from the elite answers to some extent. Even though interviewees were critical of the 'opinion-based' material, they were generally positive about how the political discourse had 'opened up' and led to more voices being heard. But the public is more positive here than the interviewees.

A chi-square test revealed a significant statistical difference based on political interest ($p < 0,001$), gender ($p < 0,01$) and age ($p < 0,05$). The data suggests that women are even more of the opinion than men that social media has contributed to people being more informed about politics. Moreover, those who are younger are more likely than older people to feel that social media has made people more informed about politics. And, those who are more politically interested are more likely than those less interested in politics to perceive social media having contributed to people being more informed about politics than before.

Following this, respondents were asked more specifically about the political debates on social media. As the interview answers illustrated, many politicians perceived the debates on social media to be quite unconstructive and stated that people with opposing views are often mainly talking *at each other*. Respondents were asked whether they thought the debates are more constructive or unconstructive.

As shown in table 36, 98% of respondents perceived social media to have had some effect on the debates, since only 2% of those surveyed answered that it had not impact on the debates. Close to a third (32%) of Icelanders perceived social media to have contributed to constructive debates, whilst a slightly larger percentage, or 38%, thought it contributed to unconstructive debates. Twenty-

eight per cent perceived it to have contributed neither to constructive nor unconstructive debates. It appears that the Icelandic population is somewhat more positive than the interviewees here (the unconstructive theme was more dominant in the interviews), although more perceive the debates as unconstructive than constructive.

Table 36. Perceptions on debates about politics on social media

	N	%	95% CI
Social media has very much contributed to constructive debates	72	6	(4.6-7.4)
Social media has somewhat contributed to constructive debates	299	26	(23.5-28.5)
Social media has neither contributed to constructive nor unconstructive debates	322	28	(25.4-30.6)
Social media has somewhat contributed to unconstructive debates	319	27	(24.4-29.6)
Social media has very much contributed to unconstructive debates	132	11	(9.2-12.8)
Social media has not had any impact on the debates	22	2	(1.2-2.8)
Completed answers	1166	100	
No answer/incomplete	96		
Total	1262		

Respondents were asked: *Some think that social media has contributed to constructive debates concerning politics in Iceland and encouraged discussions between people with differing views. Others think that social media has contributed to debates that are unconstructive and encouraged people to mainly have discussions with others who share similar views. Do you think that social media has in general contributed to constructive or unconstructive debates about politics in Iceland?*

Here a chi-square test revealed a statistically significant difference between left/right political opinions ($p < 0,001$), political interest ($p < 0,001$) and gender ($p < 0,05$). The data suggests that those who are more left-wing are more likely to perceive social media to have contributed to constructive debates than those who have more right-wing views. Moreover, women are more likely than men to answer that social media has contributed to constructive debates. Finally, those who are more interested in politics are also more likely to perceive social media having contributed to constructive debates than those who are less interested.

To sum up, it is clear from the data in Iceland that both interviewees and the public have somewhat mixed feelings about social media and its impact on political debates, political coverage and politics itself. Journalists and politicians argued that social media has opened up the discourse on politics and this was discussed positively in terms of increased agenda-setting power to the people. The public perceives social media to have made people more informed about politics. Interviewees were quite negative when discussing Facebook debates on

contentious issues and several female interviewees felt that it was a small group of mostly men who actually participates in these so-called debates. The survey answers seem to confirm this. Only 5% of the Icelandic population said that they participate very much or fairly much in political debates online, and much more men (8%) than women (2%) participate.

The chi-square test did not reveal a particular pattern in all of the answers, aside from the political interest variable. It clearly showed that a higher percentage of those more politically interested noticed debates on politics on social media, perceived social media to make people more informed about politics, enjoyed seeing the debates, participated in them, and saw them as constructive, when compared to those less politically interested. This study therefore appears to support previous research concerning political interest being linked to more activity online. Aside from this, there are no clear overall trends across the answers, although variables such as education, gender age, and income did show statistically significant differences between groups regarding particular answers. The focus now shifts to adding more depth to the picture sketched out in this section.

7.2. How are politicians and journalists using Facebook in 'public'?

This section explores how politicians and journalists perceive the more *public* usage of Facebook as it relates to political communication. Their interactions with the general public in Iceland are investigated briefly, but this topic is dealt with in more detail in the subsequent section. It quickly became apparent when conducting the initial interviews that Icelandic journalists appear quite frustrated with politicians' Facebook usage. They perceive politicians using the platform to issue 'press releases' instead of making themselves available for interviews. This can be linked to the one-way broadcasting style (e.g. Jungherr 2016) seen in larger states, as previously outlined. Journalists discussed how they perceive politicians doing this on purpose with a specific strategy, and themes echoed elements from the media logic and mediatization literature discussed in earlier chapters. This emphasises how politicians behave in a certain

way to suit the needs of the media (e.g. Strömbäck & Esser 2014). In sum, many of the journalists perceive the politicians knowing exactly what to do in order to get themselves noticed, whilst, at the same time, attempting to control the media narrative as much as possible through their broadcast style online.

Politicians have a very different assessment of their own social media usage. Many of them talked about struggling with separating their private and public identities online and not really knowing what they are doing when disseminating information. Most of them just use their own personal Facebook profiles for work-related purposes and claim to not have any particular strategy for how they are using it. They usually manage these profiles themselves (since most do not have any staff) and include a mixture of real life friends, family, members of the public, and work-related friends (including journalists) that they often interact with. These themes clearly point to a somewhat different assessment of politicians' usage of social media than much of the existing academic literature has emphasised in relation to a professional one-way top-down style.

The journalistic side

All but two journalists interviewed discussed Facebook in relation to covering politicians and communicating directly with them. Their answers point to the social networking site having become a very important work-related 'mundane internet tool' (Nielsen 2011) for them to use. A few also mentioned Twitter and other social networking sites, but Facebook is clearly the dominant player. Many journalists said that they monitor Facebook throughout the day to see if politicians are posting something on there or commenting on something that someone else has written. As one of the journalists (interview 36) simply put it: 'I always have Facebook open when I am at work. Always. I have to. Otherwise I might miss some big and important story.' Similar points were echoed in a majority of the interviews with journalists. It appears that Facebook is to an extent viewed as the main sphere for political dissemination in Iceland and it is therefore important to know what takes place there. This can be related back to the discussion in chapter 5 concerning the lack of initiative coming from Icelandic journalists and media outlets. Journalists are usually very reactive, and Facebook

was, therefore, often discussed as the quickest and most practical venue to get information and ideas for political stories. For overworked journalists working in a small media market with limited resources, it is very convenient to simply open Facebook to see 'what is going on'.

According to a majority of the journalists interviewed, it has become increasingly common for Icelandic politicians to post political status updates on Facebook, usually on their personal profiles, and sometimes they subsequently refuse to answer questions from journalists related to the issue they posted about. Many journalists had a negative view of this. As one journalist (interview 8) stated succinctly: 'What has perhaps annoyed us is that some politicians seem to view Facebook posts as replacements for interviews.' This leads to politicians having even more power in the relationship with journalists (as outlined in detail in chapter 6), according to a majority of the journalists, since they do not 'have to' answer tough questions, and can instead simply post exactly what they want to say. Politicians often use Facebook to 'break stories' they know are about to be published by a media outlet and ruin the 'scoop'. They try and frame the story in a way that makes them sympathetic and this can mobilise their supporters online. As one journalist (interview 4) put it:

> If you are a politician in some sort of crisis situation, it is very easy for you to simply turn off your phone, write a status on your Facebook profile and then not do anything else. But everyone will write a news story based on this status. Then you have written word for word what will be quoted, and this is placed in all the news items and becomes the headline. We are seeing this happening more and more.

In the previous section it was outlined how politicians can lose control of narratives with the 'opening up' of debates online, but here it was highlighted that their own Facebook profiles can be used very successfully to frame how issues are put forth and covered in the media. In other words, they can also be more in control of the narrative that develops. This, again, can be related to the one-way broadcasting style, which has been studied empirically in the larger states. When using Facebook for others to see, the politician can easily just say what she or he wants and does not need to engage with anyone. Facebook is like

a press release, since the journalists see what the politician wants to say, but it differs in that the public sees the post at the same time as the journalists do.

Many of journalists stated that their newsrooms are struggling with how to deal with this development. The Facebook status can be newsworthy since it is out in the 'public' domain like a statement in parliament or the standard press release, but it is being debated in the newsrooms whether it should be covered or not if the politician refuses to answer questions following the publication of the status. What seems to be the consensus is that if the status is deemed newsworthy, the journalists mention what is discussed in it, and, if the politician refuses to be interviewed, then this is mentioned in the news reports as well. This, however, does not necessarily apply to the biggest online news sites. Those pages will simply publish the status once it is out in the open since they depend on constant web traffic throughout the day and this is a quick and easy way to cover politics and get 'clicks' (see a more detailed discussion in chapter 5). Many journalists interviewed in 2017 likened this behaviour to how Donald Trump uses Twitter to get his views across in the news.

A majority of the journalists interviewed mentioned that they do not think that typical politicians would get away with this to the same extent in larger democracies (several joked that they did not include Trump in this category of 'typical politicians'). To simply write a Facebook status and then refuse to answer questions about the topic would, they think, not be tolerated elsewhere. A few explanations were given as to why politicians often get away with this in Iceland. The smaller staff numbers mean that journalists simply do not have time to follow ministers or other politicians around for whole days until they answer. Also, as highlighted in the previous chapter, most Icelandic journalists are generalists and they are not necessarily in a position to be solely focusing on politics and to know what types of critical questions to ask, if given the opportunity. In this sense, the Facebook status is a very practical and 'safe' information subsidy. Moreover, it was mentioned that the journalism culture is sometimes 'too polite' in Iceland in the sense that if the politicians are not willing to answer, it can be seen as pushy to keep trying. As discussed previously in the thesis, the intimacy of the small

society (Lowenthal 1987; Benedict 1966) in Iceland can make it more difficult for journalists to pursue tough questioning and this can lead to self-censorship.

It was almost a unanimous assessment amongst the journalists that the politicians are clearly using Facebook in a way that 'suits the needs' of the weak legacy media in Iceland. As illustrated in chapter 5, politicians often give a certain type of speech in the parliamentary chamber that is written specifically with the needs of the media in mind. These are in short segments at the start of the parliamentary schedule called 'störf þingsins', 'fundarstjórn forseta' and 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir'. The politicians now also seem to have learned what the media 'wants' from their online profiles. According to the journalists, politicians clearly realise that *everything* they do on Facebook can be covered by media outlets. This applies to both their official pages and the more 'private' personal profiles. They are therefore always in work mode when they are online. As one of the journalists (interview 9) stated: 'Politicians who are public figures are more aware of this than those of us who are not public figures. They realise that what they are doing on there is not private.'

Many journalists argued that this type of digital mediatized political behaviour is contributing to the ever-increasing superficiality in political coverage in Iceland. What is happening more and more is that what is presented as 'political news reports' are often largely online summaries from politicians' Facebook posts, with little or no critical input from the journalists themselves. This type of shallow, pseudo-political coverage is quick and easy to produce, especially for small media outlets with overworked journalists, who often lack knowledge in politics.

These types of 'Facebook news stories' were discussed as a major problem in political coverage in the majority of the interviews with Icelandic journalists. As one journalist (interview 33) succinctly put it: 'The problem is that Facebook is not the fourth estate. We are supposed to be.' It was often mentioned in the interviews that it is not enough to simply summarise what has been taking place online on Facebook. In this sense the legacy media just becomes a dissemination

outlet for the online debates. Or, to put it differently, debates in the public sphere have increasingly started to exist and originate online on Facebook without much input from journalists and the legacy media in Iceland.

Journalists were very negative in their assessment of how this can impact their democratic roles. As outlined previously in the thesis, the journalists mostly see themselves as watchdogs and disseminators of important information. It is difficult to fulfil these roles if the politicians are increasingly bypassing you, both online and also through the political coverage, which is produced directly from the online material. In relation to this, it was clear from the interviews with journalists that they perceive politicians to be too 'in control' on social media with a clear *public* one-way broadcast style strategy. The attention now shifts to the politicians, whose perceptions regarding their own social media usage drastically differed from those of the journalists.

The political side
When the politicians discussed why they were on social media, it was usually because they wanted to disseminate information on what they were doing and get themselves noticed. This echoes findings from other countries, where studies have shown that dissemination and self-promotion are central to politicians' social media accounts (Graham et al. 2016). As Enli and Skogerbø (2013) highlight, even in a party-centred system like Norway (or Iceland as is relevant here), there is much more emphasis on politicians' personalities than before. It is no longer mainly about the party. Politicians have to market themselves and make themselves interesting to voters. As they argue, 'social media fit into long-term ongoing processes where political communication has become increasingly focused on personalities and personal traits of politicians' (p. 758). This can be linked to the argument that the distinction between public and private lives becomes blurred on social media. Many of the Icelandic politicians interviewed highlighted the fact that they get the most 'likes' on Facebook when they write something witty or share a personal story rather than talk about politics or policy. A recent study points to a similar conclusion. In their content analysis of German politicians' Facebook posts, Metz et al. (2019) found that the use of a more

emotional and private style yields positive effects on audience engagement, suggesting audiences' demand for more intimate and emotional impressions of public figures on the web.

As illustrated, journalists perceive politicians to have a clear strategy for their Facebook usage. This is not the perception that one comes away with after talking to Icelandic politicians. Over two-thirds of those interviewed discussed that they are struggling with how to use Facebook and have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to separate their professional and more personal identities. Several of the politicians mentioned that they created a professional Facebook page that was intended to mainly focus on work related topics. Anyone who is interested in following that page can simply 'like' it and get updates on their Facebook news feed. However, what many politicians said is that what tends to happen is that this professional page is mainly used during elections and primaries. In the periods between elections, the page is often dormant.

Most of the politicians also have a personal profile page (with a limit of 5000 'friends' – and possibilities for other people to 'follow') and this tends to become the main site they use for *everything* and is therefore somewhat 'messy'. On these profiles, the politicians discuss their work-related material, but also communicate jokingly with their friends, share pictures of the children and so forth. Several of the politicians interviewed said that they are more careful than before when it comes to what they post on Facebook and some said that they have removed family photos and other personal material. Others said that everything just becomes mixed up and that it is too much work to try and sort it all out. During the interviews, the politicians would often show me these profiles and illustrate many dilemmas they are facing, such as if they should accept invites to events for other to see, if they should accept friend requests from people they do not know and so on. Many asked me for my advice on how to do this. I jokingly moved the conversation along by saying that I was not there to offer them public relations advice.

All of the politicians active on Facebook mentioned that they are aware that journalists are monitoring their behaviour on Facebook on these more 'private' or 'personal' profiles. Most have journalists as 'friends' on there and some also allow people to 'follow' their profile so they do not need to be a 'friend' to see updates. Politicians often send friend requests to journalists and journalists likewise send requests to the politicians, according to the interviews. This is increasingly linked to the more private communication via Facebook Messenger, which is discussed in the subsequent section. As one politician (interview 12) said, regarding separating the professional and the personal on Facebook:

> I am very aware that there are certain things I cannot say. I mean there is a certain amount of editing. Because you know I cannot just tell a joke that could be picked up as prejudicial towards a certain social group, for example. My friends would get the joke, but it could get me into trouble as a politician.

Many of the MPs echoed this and said that they needed to be very careful about what they said on Facebook. 'Everybody is following everybody' since 'everybody knows everybody', as highlighted in chapter 6. And, according to the interview perceptions, 'everybody is on Facebook'. As another politician (interview 16) put it:

> Yes, obviously everyone is on Facebook. And everyone uses computers and you know everyone knows everyone or someone knows someone who knows you, and then everyone is just in your face. It is obviously not like that if you live in the United Kingdom or some nation with millions of inhabitants.

This echoes the themes of the intense small state social ecology and multiple role relationships (Benedict 1966) outlined in the previous chapter. Politicians and journalists are constantly running into each other in all sorts of settings outside of the work environment. This was seen to be replicated to some extent online on Facebook, through the news feed and various events, photos being shared, membership in Facebook groups and so on.

Most of the Icelandic politicians interviewed said that Facebook adds to their already hectic work schedule, which was described in the previous chapter. On

the social network, they are constantly getting notifications about events they are invited to (and are expected to attend), as well as being 'tagged' in posts where members of the public are raising specific issues and want input or answers. Over a third of the politicians mentioned that they often get ideas from the public on Facebook. They then use these ideas in their work in parliament, for example, to ask government ministers about specific issues in 'óundirbúnar fyrirspurnir' in the parliamentary chamber (discussed in chapter 5) that are on the minds of their Facebook friends. As one politician (interview 42) said:

> Sometimes when I come home after a long day in the parliament I open Facebook and I see something like 50 notifications of things that are relevant to my work and many people are expecting an answer. This can be very draining but can also give me ideas, so it helps, but it is very time consuming.

The politicians who brought this up often discussed this in relation to the short chains of command outlined in the previous chapter. Icelanders are used to being able to easily reach people offline, including politicians, so they *expect* politicians online to respond to them. In relation to this, the absence of small states from research on social media and politics is not just evident by them not being there, but also in various underlying assumptions made by authors studying online interactions between politicians and the public. For example, Tromble (2018) states that citizens do not necessarily expect a response from politicians on social media when reacting to their posts. She argues that this is because people 'are used to top-down communication, and though they may desire reciprocity-even believe it warranted-they are unlikely to expect it from politicians' (p. 681).

The Icelandic case is very different and points to two-way interactions online between politicians and citizens that can impact what the politician does. As stated earlier in the chapter, one of the most well-documented causes for citizens' disconnection from politics is the view that they have no say in political affairs because there is little dialogue and discussion with the politicians, and because politicians do not listen. The possibility of two-way interaction between citizens and politicians online is seen as helping with democratic accountability. This type of two-way interaction does take place in Iceland, but it is important to emphasise

that this was usually explained by interviewees in relation to Iceland's smallness, not specifically the democratic enhancement of the internet. That is, people are used to being in close proximity to politicians offline, so the same applies online.

It was highlighted in the previous section that most politicians said that they have learned to stay away from 'hot topic' debates when commenting on Facebook, but most of the politicians said that they 'sometimes' respond to people in the comments section on their Facebook profiles, particularly when things are more 'calm'. They interact with members of the public and also with other politicians and journalists. This is routinely also done in various Facebook groups, such as those created by political parties and in relation to various political issues. Many politicians said that this was often to correct some sort of misunderstanding about a topic that they had been talking about, or to provide further information. These informal comments are then sometimes used in news reports as quotes from the politicians. This was, again, discussed in relation to the politicians being aware that *everything* they do on Facebook is being monitored (also by journalists and citizens not participating in the actual debates but simply observing them). Many of the interviewees linked this to the smallness and informality of the society.

The perceptions of Icelandic politicians appear to be somewhat more similar to local politicians in the Nordic countries as opposed to those on the national stage there. A recent study of Norwegian local politicians found that Facebook was by far more popular than the more 'elite' Twitter that politicians on the national stage use (Larsson & Skogerbø 2018, p. 225). The study found that social media usage needs to be understood in the context of the already established communication and media channels. Results from the study indicate that 'two-way communicative efforts (such as communication with citizens or interest groups) were ranked as highly important' (p. 231). As is the case with the offline politician-journalist relationships in Iceland discussed in the previous chapter, findings from the local level in the Nordic countries seem to echo some of the findings from the national level in Iceland. Icelandic politicians view Facebook as more important than Twitter, and two-way communication is viewed as quite

important in some instances. And this two-way communication is viewed as even more important in the more *private* setting on Facebook Messenger, which has received scant academic attention.

7.3. How are politicians and journalists using social media in 'private'?

In a recent study on interactions between political journalists and politicians in Austria, Maurer and Beiler (2018) discuss the multitude of online and offline message channels available when it comes to contemporary political communication. Their findings are that offline communication is still the predominant form of communication. As they state: 'It appears that online communication is a distinct and marginal form of direct communication in political journalism as far as personal interactions are concerned. Along these lines, Twitter and WhatsApp communications were mentioned only very sparsely in the open interviews' (p. 7). The Icelandic case differs significantly from these findings, as this final section illustrates. What the interviews with politicians and journalists revealed is that the mobile instant messaging service (often referred to more simply as a 'messaging app') on Facebook, called Facebook Messenger, is a dominant communication channel between politicians and journalists in Iceland. As one of the journalists summed it up (interview 48): 'One of the best kept secrets of journalism in Iceland is that most of the communication with politicians takes place on Facebook Messenger.' Furthermore, citizens are involved in two-way interactions with politicians and journalists on there.

As illustrated in chapter 3, the more *private* online activity on social media has been mostly ignored by academics studying social media and politics. As Dennis (2019) points out, the methodological orthodoxy of social media research 'emphasises publicly observable interactions' (p. 180). This leads to important blind spots in existing research. If the study presented in this thesis had simply followed this orthodoxy, it would have missed this important two-way interactive online channel. The private messaging apps are drawing scholarly attention when it comes to citizen engagement and interactions (Dennis 2019;

Valeriani & Vaccari 2018; Vaccari & Valeriani 2018) but there is a lack of attention when it comes to the examination of interactions between politicians, journalists and citizens. The following findings reveal that a new type of online public-private dichotomy framework needs to be established for examining political communication on social media. I refer to this as a 'two-level online sphere'.

It quickly became apparent in the interviews that Facebook Messenger is the dominant way that politicians and journalists communicate with each other in Iceland. According to the 2017 Reuters Digital News Report, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger are by far the most popular messaging applications in the 36 countries included in the study. WhatsApp is slightly more popular overall (40% vs. 36%), but in the four Nordic countries that participated in the study (Iceland was not included), Facebook Messenger was far more popular than WhatsApp. The interviews seem to strongly suggest that the same is true of Iceland.

Journalists and politicians mentioned that they also use text messages and the phone when communicating with each other, but Messenger is used very often. To revert back to my own communication with the politicians and journalists discussed in chapter 4, it was routinely most effective to simply send people a message on Facebook Messenger and notify them of the email I had sent if I had not received a response. I usually received a response shortly afterwards on Messenger and the email was answered soon after that. This was the case with people I knew beforehand as well as people I did not know, and with regular MPs as well as government ministers. Most of these very busy people were very apologetic when replying to my messages on Facebook Messenger and answered in a very informal manner. Countless responses started with 'Sorry', 'Hi', or something similar.

A majority of the journalists said that they rely heavily on this type of communication with politicians. It is a very convenient way to book interviews, and also, if they need some specific information for a news report, the whole exchange or interview might take place on Facebook Messenger. Questions are

sent and subsequently the politician responds with her or his reply. This is then used as an 'interview' in news reports. Several journalists moreover mentioned that they often communicate with politicians online when the politicians are in committee meetings, or in other settings where the politician cannot answer the phone. Messenger is then sometimes used to find out what is happening in the closed committee hearing, and the politician is asked when he can be interviewed following the meeting. This type of online communication needs to be understood in relation to the working conditions outlined in the previous chapter. Journalists and politicians rarely meet in professional settings in Iceland, and so this two-way online private gateway is a convenient substitute for the lack of offline professional engagement. Many of the younger journalists mentioned how bizarre they found it initially to be 'chatting' with a senior politician on Messenger but quickly became used to it. As one of them (interview 36) said:

> Now I just find it perfectly normal to be casually talking to politicians on there. A government minister or someone like that. It is considered standard practice by most and often saves a lot of time for both the journalist and the politician.

Journalists who have been in charge of putting together news programmes where they had to line up several political guests said that they had sometimes relied exclusively on Facebook Messenger to set up all the interviews. All of them have politicians on Facebook as 'friends'. Some said that they had sent requests to the politicians for work related purposes, whilst others said that they had received friend requests from the politicians. Many of the journalists mentioned that when Facebook was first starting out they would have found it out of bounds to be 'friends' with politicians on there and to be 'liking' various things, but that these types of interactions have now become normalised. One of the more senior journalists (interview 48) was very critical of this. He said that it has always been difficult to keep some sort of professional distance in Iceland, but that this online small state ecology had made this even more difficult. You are constantly seeing something 'personal' from the politicians, and then you are supposed to be critical in interviews. This blurs the boundaries even further and can create additional difficulties for the watchdog role of the media.

The themes that were linked to the more private two-way interactions concerned *constant connectivity* and *immediacy*. Many interviewees highlighted that you can 'always' be reached through Facebook Messenger. Unless you specifically change the privacy settings, people can see when you are online, when you were last online, and when you saw their message. If you have not seen the message, the other person might get the impression that you are ignoring it. Many noted how Messenger is different than email, text messages, and the phone, because people can see when you are online, they can see when you see the messages, and they expect a response straight away. Also, you cannot easily 'hide' on Facebook Messenger. People do not need your phone number or email address to contact you. They can simply look you up on Facebook and send you a message there. To revert back to my own correspondence with many interviewees, that is exactly what I did and I received a response from every single interviewee.

Politicians echoed what the journalists said. Facebook Messenger is heavily used, both for booking interviews and also to exchange information with journalists. It was often mentioned that these types of brief exchanges would simply take place in person if the journalists were physically closer to the politicians. However, as outlined in the previous chapter, Icelandic journalists are mostly absent from the Icelandic parliament, unlike, for example, journalists in Denmark and the United Kingdom (Dindler 2015; Davis 2010). What was much more dominant in the interviews with the politicians than with the journalists was the emphasis that they also placed on the private messages they receive from the public. Most politicians mentioned that members of the public routinely message them. As one of the younger politicians (interview 28) said:

> Here in Iceland I often find that people expect politicians, including ministers, to answer private messages that are sent to them informally on Facebook Messenger. I find this again and again to be the case. People are used to having lots of access to Icelandic politicians and they therefore feel the same way online. They expect to have access.

A majority of the politicians said that they do not necessary answer all messages, since some of them are from people simply 'telling them off' and not really looking

for a response. When they do answer, the messages are often from people looking for assistance concerning some difficult issues that are 'stuck in the system' or to ask them about a particular matter they are working on. The politicians either answer questions directly or refer people to someone else. It became clear in the answers that many politicians are somewhat unsure about how to deal with these messages. They are contacted in a *private* setting, a 'space' owned by a private company, with no official record of the discussion having taken place. Sometimes the politicians simply receive information that they can use in their work, similar to the online public interactions discussed earlier in the chapter. But interviewees also mentioned being contacted about more official matters that they were unsure about how to deal with. Usually they tried to point people to more official channels.

This type of communication raises several important points. As illustrated, this is an accessible way to reach the politicians, many people expect a response, and yet this important private venue for communication with those who govern the country is taking place in a *private* space that is controlled by a company in the United States. Several politicians raised this point in our interviews and mentioned that people use this unofficial channel far too much. Who controls all the sensitive information that is shared through this private channel? Who keeps a record of this? The two-way engagement between journalists and politicians? And the two-way engagement between politicians and citizens?

I have illustrated, with my own example, how easy and straightforward this type of communication is in Iceland. But how common are these *private* interactions generally? How connected is the public to Icelandic politicians online? According to the survey administered for the thesis, 22% of Icelanders have 'liked' or 'followed' an Icelandic politician on Facebook and the same number applies to a political party. Much fewer follow a politician on Twitter (6%), Snapchat (3%), or Instagram (2%). The 2017 Reuters Digital News Report found that around a third of Americans (35%), a quarter of Spanish (25%), a fifth of Irish (23%), Australians (20%), and British (18%), and a tenth of Germans (11%) follow a politician or party directly on some social media platform. It is discussed in the

report that while these numbers are much bigger than those traditionally associated with political parties, it is not clear how deep this engagement goes. It is furthermore highlighted in the report that direct online communication between politicians and individuals remains a minority activity (Newman et al. 2017). Iceland has not been part of the Reuters study (the only Nordic country excluded), but my survey shows that Iceland is close to Spain, Ireland, and Austria when it comes to following politicians on social media. Simply examining these numbers and to not dig deeper would, however, result in a very superficial and problematic assessment.

As previously highlighted, much of the main online political activity takes place on the personal profiles, where people can request to be 'friends' with the politicians. I argue that this needs to be understood in relation to the small state ecology. To revert back to the normalisation hypothesis, it suggests that patterns offline will be similar to those online. Since Iceland is so small, there are various connections between members of the public and politicians, as outlined previously in relation to the small state traits (Sarapuu 2010), multiple role relationships (Benedict 1966) and managed intimacy (Lowenthal 1987). In the survey, respondents were asked if they are friends with a politician in real life. When referring to politicians in the survey it was explicitly mentioned that this only referred to one of the 63 current members of parliament in Iceland. Over 1 out of 10 (13%) respondents said that they have at least one friend who is a politician and 27% said that they have at least one acquaintance who is a politician. The numbers grew even higher when local politicians were added to the equation. Furthermore, 5% of respondents said that they are closely related to a politician (one of the 63 in parliament).

Because of these very close relations it should perhaps not come as a surprise if the public interacts with the politicians quite extensively on Facebook. According to the survey results, 17% of Icelanders had one politician (of the 63 members of parliament) as a Facebook friend. This is not through some 'liked' professional page, but instead they were friends through their personal profile. Even more people, 20%, had 2-5 politicians as friends on Facebook. Five per cent of the

population had 6-15 politicians as Facebook friends, and 3% of the population had more than 15 politicians as Facebook friends. So, just under half of the Icelandic population (45%), had at least one of the 63 members of parliament as a friend on Facebook when the survey was sent out in 2017. These are substantially higher numbers than the 'follow' or 'like' numbers previously mentioned, both in Iceland and in an international comparison. These online 'friendships' are not necessarily linked to the fact that people are interested in following what the politician is doing politically, but instead they can exist because they are friends in real life, related or have more than one type of offline connection. To revert once again to the small state ecology illustrated in more detail in the previous chapter, this can be defined in terms of the 'everybody knows everybody' perception. As several of the politicians mentioned, everything on their Facebook profiles becomes 'mixed up'. Boundaries between the personal and professional are blurred and this creates much confusion for the politicians when trying to determine how to use their social media accounts.

Respondents were, moreover, asked about their activity on Facebook in the last twelve months as it relates to politicians. A quarter (25%) of respondents said that they had 'liked' at least one status that a politician has written, 11% had commented on a status that a politician had written and *8% of the Icelandic population sent a politician a private message on Facebook Messenger in the twelve months before the survey was sent out*. These numbers highlight that a somewhat large group of people does in fact interact with politicians on Facebook, both publicly and privately. This confirms the perception from most of the interviews conducted with politicians. People are actively involved on Facebook and politicians receive feedback on their work, encouragement, and criticism, but also messages about various issues. And the feeling is often that the public expects a response.

I argue that this section, focusing on the more private online behaviour, illustrates an important avenue for further studies. In their comparative study of the 39 states in the world with under one million inhabitants, Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) mention briefly that their interviews highlighted perceptions

of more public two-way interactions on social media than research has shown in larger states. The findings here seem to echo this to an extent and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter in relation to the small state literature. However, what the findings additionally show is that much of the two-way interaction actually takes place in more private settings.

Why might interactions be taking place more privately? As discussed earlier in the thesis, the 2018 Reuters Digital News Report found that privacy is increasingly an important issue for social media users, and this partly explains the growth in the use of messaging apps for news. This was true for the more authoritarian countries, but people are also increasingly turning to these apps in the non-authoritarian states. One reason is that they do not always feel comfortable in expressing their political views in front of their friends, acquaintances and family (Newman et al. 2018, pp. 52–53). In other words, there is a degree of self-censorship in the more public settings, resulting in less engagement. The engagement increasingly takes place in what people appear to perceive to be more private settings (which are controlled by private companies). This private engagement would be missed using the dominant way of researching social media through publicly observable behaviour and interactions, such as tweets, retweets and hashtags on Twitter, as well as status updates, comments and news sharing on Facebook. If we want to examine this behaviour, we need to expand how we study social media. I argue that we need to establish a new type of online public-private dichotomy and understand that different types of engagement take place in different settings, publicly and privately.

My study reveals that online political communication on Facebook in Iceland can be defined as a 'two-level online sphere'. The first level is the public version of the communication and the second level is the more private avenue through Facebook Messenger. As shown, to some extent the more public version echoes findings from the larger states. Politicians are perceived to engage routinely in one-way broadcast style communication, and not engaging with the public and journalists when 'difficult' or 'hot topic' issues are being discussed publicly online. This is not to say that two-way interactions do not take place on this level.

They do, but seem to occur when tempers do not run high, and are often to correct misunderstandings or to get ideas, rather than engaging in-depth in discussions.

The second level, emphasised in this section, highlights that much two-way interaction takes place more privately on Facebook Messenger. There, whole interviews are conducted, discussions take place between journalists and politicians, and members of the public routinely engage with politicians and expect a response. Is this second level unique to smaller states like Iceland, or do they exist to some extent in larger states as well? This has yet to be systematically researched. It is clear, as relates to Iceland, that public and private roles become blurred in the more public settings on social media, but, moreover, that a different type of public and private dichotomy is clearly present online. There is a performative dimension in the first level (public), whilst there appear to be different types of communicative norms in the second level (private). Put simply, we cannot fully appreciate the political communication interactions within the Facebook architecture by solely examining the *public* content. Much of the interaction takes place in the more *private* settings.

Conclusions

This study differs from previous ones conducted on social media and politics. The limitations of the existing literature can be seen in the fact that existing studies are mainly centred on publicly available content (usually on Twitter during elections) and study larger and more unequal societies. As shown, the Icelandic case does illustrate various similarities with previous findings, for example, concerning the one-way broadcasting style and increasing focus on personality over substance. Much of what this study does reveal, however, is very different from previous findings and this warrants further investigation and analysis.

It has been shown that offline structures in society can impact online structures (the normalisation hypothesis). As the previous chapters have shown, Icelandic society is small and informal. In contrast to the existing literature that highlights socio-economic structures inhibiting the internet's democratic potential, it can be argued that Iceland is an ideal case to illustrate whether the internet enables

and encourages interactive discussions between elites and the public, especially as it is difficult to argue for some sort of digital divide in Iceland.

As illustrated, 99% of Icelanders use the internet regularly, and 93% use Facebook regularly. Furthermore, as highlighted at the start of the thesis, Iceland is among the richest countries in the world (Gregson, 2017). Equality is high, the public is highly educated (World Economic Forum 2018a; OECD 2017) and, as illustrated in the previous chapter, the smallness of the society and blurred boundaries result in much less fragmentation than is present in larger societies. The present chapter illustrated to a certain extent that the internet is perceived to have facilitated democratic discussions where elites and the public can (and do) interact in two-way discussions. The findings suggest that much interaction takes place between journalists and politicians behind closed digital doors on Facebook Messenger, and, moreover, that the public actively participates in private interactions with elites. This type of private communication between elites and citizens through messaging apps has not been studied previously, but it is clearly a key component of online political communication in Iceland and warrants further investigation.

So, what does this discussion mean for the democratic roles of the media? As the chapter illustrated, the increased opportunity for politicians to completely bypass journalists and the legacy media leads to problems concerning the watchdog role. There is less interrogation that takes place, and instead accountability becomes more about visibility. That is, people can criticise politicians 'out in the open', but, as discussed in the chapter, this criticism is not necessarily taken seriously on the performative first level on social media (public). Moreover, journalists' gatekeeping and dissemination role is diminished if politicians do not need them as much as they used to. The politician can now simply go on Facebook and tell people what he is doing. This was perceived to be even more exaggerated in Iceland than in the larger states because of the weak position of the legacy media and close proximity between politicians and citizens. According to the survey administered for this thesis, only a small minority of the general public (5%) actively participates in *public* political debates online in

Iceland. The findings do reveal that more people have interacted with politicians than engaged in political debates, but this is still a small portion of the overall population. It can be argued that even an ideal setting for a digital mediated public sphere like Iceland does not result in much political participation from the general public. If the legacy media is becoming weaker and is perceived to be failing in its political coverage, and online platforms only engage a small portion of the population (even in a country where this is not a question of access, class, education or distance), then where does this leave us?

As the chapter highlighted, journalists and politicians perceive social media as having opened up the debate in Iceland and the public perceives social media to have made people more informed about politics than before. However, the idea that social media is a public sphere replacement for the media proves problematic. As shown, the Icelandic case is probably as ideal a case as possible to test the democratic enhancing possibilities of the internet. It has the potential to facilitate *open and inclusive public debates*. It should be easy for people to talk *directly* to their representatives, and vice versa, since the state is so small, and people are close. The reality, however, is not quite like this. In the more public settings, there are perceptions of top-down broadcast style behaviour, in addition to limited two-way interaction. And much of the two-way interaction that does take place is in fact not taking place publicly, but rather on the second level in the online sphere (private).

The ideal case for an online *public* sphere does not in fact reveal a well-functioning online public sphere. In the Icelandic case, people have access to the online community, are close to elites, and are living in a comparatively equal society. Therefore, the so-called digital divide or socio-economic structural inequality cannot explain why people are not engaging more in online political debates in *public* in Iceland. The answer lies elsewhere.

The focus now turns to the first of two concluding chapters of the thesis. It engages with the material presented in this chapter, as well as in the previous two empirical chapters, and synergises the findings as they relate to the small

states literature. The subsequent chapter then discusses the Icelandic case in more detail and illustrates what it can potentially tell us about the larger democracies of the world.

CHAPTER 8:
Size as a variable in the media and politics relationship –
Four dimensions of 'scaled down' political communication dynamics

The world's smallest states are routinely ignored in political communication research. The same applies, to an extent, to small states in other academic fields, such as political science and public administration. The scarce work that has been conducted in those fields has revealed an important finding: small states have a lot in common. And, moreover, these commonalities draw attention to certain differences when compared to larger states. Studies have shown that small states cannot simply be viewed as smaller versions of the large states that have been central in knowledge production. In other words, the differences related to size are not solely quantitative. They are, importantly, also qualitative (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019).

My work has highlighted differences (as well as similarities) between Iceland and larger states concerning the legacy media, politician-journalist relations, and interactions on social media. Reverting back to Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), they have illustrated the problem with 'naïve universalism', the tendency to presume that political communication findings from one country are universal. As they put it, 'although many theoretical propositions about the social and political functions of the mass media are couched in universal terms, the evidence adduced in support of them is almost always culturally specific' (p. 75). It is clear from my empirical findings that the heavy reliance on Anglo-American and western research from large and medium sized democracies has resulted in underlying assumptions that are not applicable when examining the Icelandic case. Simply put, existing frameworks appear to be limited, as they do not capture important elements in the media and politics ecology in a small state like Iceland.

I argue that this limitation is partly due to previous research not engaging systematically with size as a variable when examining political communication dynamics at the national level. This does not become apparent until one starts to include small states in the mix of states studied. Researchers will not necessarily pick up on how size is a key factor if the cases examined do not include the world's

smallest states. This is because the clearest difference in the impact of the size variable should, logically, be between the largest and smallest states.

This chapter addresses this limitation by expanding relevant media and political frameworks so that they are better able to capture important dynamics in small states. Dynamics that draw attention to the *qualitative differences between small and large states that can be linked to size*. Findings from previous chapters provide a useful roadmap in building these explorative frameworks. This, however, leads to a potential problem. I only have one small state case in the thesis. Will this endeavour, therefore, not simply be guilty of a similar sort of naïve universalism as mentioned earlier? If I argue that findings from one small state are applicable in other small states, am I not falling into the same trap? This is, in fact, not the case, because the research explored is building on existing work that has been carried out on other small states in relation to the size variable. However, this research has, to date, *not* examined the relationship between media and politics specifically. It has, for example, focused on democracy in small states, public administration and governance (e.g. Corbett & Veenendaal 2018; Sarapuu 2010).

In this chapter, I expand the relevant research from other academic fields that have focused on small states and size, and relate this to the political communication findings from the Icelandic case outlined in previous chapters. In sum, I synergise relevant empirical findings from Iceland on media and politics as they relate to the small state literature. This is done through the construction of explorative frameworks that highlight *four dimensions of 'scaled down' political communication dynamics*. These dimensions are not meant to be all-encompassing frameworks, but rather a useful roadmap to explore important avenues for further research concerning smaller states. Starting with the underlying assumptions illustrated in earlier chapters, I ask a simple question: What might change in these taken for granted assumptions if the states under investigation were smaller states as opposed to larger ones? This is linked to a more fundamental underlying question: What might the political communication discipline look like if it included these states in its research?

The normative reference point is, as in previous chapters, the ideal democratic roles of the news media. These focus on how the media should hold those in power to account, stage an informed and plural public debate, and represent the people to authority (Curran 2002). Are there any particular small state nuances that need to be incorporated into these ideals? And, if so, what does this mean for the news media's role in small states? The chapter is in two main sections. The first one briefly outlines the relevant differences between small and large states and, in relation to this, how it is helpful to define small states for further studies on media and politics. Following this, the second section introduces the four dimensions of scaled down political communication dynamics.

8.1. Small states, personalism and the continuum of size

This section briefly summarises the relevant findings in the small state studies literature discussed in more detail earlier in the thesis. As noted previously, size as a variable has not been completely ignored in comparative research on media and politics on the national level. It has been used in studying peculiarities and vulnerabilities of media systems in small states (Puppis 2009). An important limitation of this existing work is that it mainly focuses on *structural* aspects related to smallness. As such, it focuses on the size of the media market, how this impacts media production and so on. Less attention has been paid to the *socio-cultural* dimensions. In my research, I expanded the research agenda related to the size variable and smallness to the more socio-cultural elements concerning, in particular, interactions, working practices and relationships between politicians, journalists and the public. Existing research on small states in other fields has shown how socio-cultural aspects are important in understanding the qualitative differences between small and large states (e.g. Sarapuu 2010), but there has been little emphasis placed on this in political communication studies on the national level, until now.

There has been a clear global trend toward ever smaller states and the number of small states has risen substantially in recent years. 'As a result, to omit states with less than 500,000 inhabitants would now mean that approximately 15% of

the available cases are excluded from analysis. This figure grows to more than 20% if the population threshold is raised to 1 million' (Veenendaal & Corbett 2015, p. 529). Comparative political science research (a much larger field than political communication) often ignores these states and the implicit message is clear: These states do not matter. As discussed previously, Veenendaal and Corbett argue that small states do indeed matter in comparative politics and their rationale is methodological, in terms of representativeness and variation. First, if small states are similar to the larger states with regard to political arrangements, then researchers are wasting valuable data by not including them in their work. Second, if small states differ from the larger states politically, then we are missing out on the insights that these cases offer. The focus here highlights the latter part, concerning key differences between small and large states when it comes to the relationship between media and politics.

In a recent comparative study of democracy in the 39 small states in the world with under one million inhabitants, the same authors conclude that, politically, these states share some common attributes that can be directly related to their smallness. The cases varied considerably aside from the smallness variable, so other factors were not seen to be as decisive as the size factor. Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) define small state politics in terms of 'small state personalism', which emphasises how the role of individuals overall takes on greater significance than in larger states. They discuss this in relation to how small states offer extreme examples of informal and personality-driven polities and argue that these dynamics cannot be captured solely through quantitative measurements common in comparative political science.

These personalism dynamics have implications for the administration of these small states. It is often argued that 'small is beautiful' when it comes to governance. This can be linked back to antiquity and the Greek city states (Dahl & Tufte 1973).[68] According to Plato and Aristotle, but also Montesquieu and

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[68] Smallness limits the number of competing interests and the Aristotelian belief is that political stability is best maintained when the citizenry can meet and debate matters of concern (Corbett 2015).

Rosseau, smallness leads to a more governable state (Aristotle 1996; Rousseau 2003, cf. Corbett & Veneendaal 2018, p.145). The argument is that the small size of the state brings those in power closer to citizens. This should make decision-makers more representative, accountable and responsive. In practice, however, smallness provides mixed blessings (Corbett 2015). Whilst being more governable in terms of size, small state personalism can create conformity and compliance and stifle pluralism (Baldacchino 2012). Small states are likely to lack a critical mass of institutionalised interest groups that could balance each other out in the political discourse (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019). Research has, moreover, shown that accountability is difficult to maintain in small states when citizens are constantly interacting with each other in overlapping personal and professional roles (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018).

This links back to the discussion earlier in the thesis concerning the public administration and governance literature. As Sarapuu (2010, p. 33) sums up, research indicates that small states show special administrative characteristics and present particular behavioural 'patterns the more one goes down the scale (size of population being the criterion).' Population influences the inner workings of small states mainly through two mechanisms: first through the limited availability of resources, mostly human capital; and second, through a particular type of social ecology. Farrugia (1993) shows the importance of understanding that senior officials in small states work under drastically different conditions than their colleagues in larger states, even if their titles and duties appear identical. Tiny populations mean that a small number of people are involved in the administration, there are limited possibilities for specialisation, a limited pool of skilled persons to perform important roles and the small social field leads to a particular kind of social ecology, defined by a closely knit and integrated community with highly personalised relations.

The argument in this literature is not to adopt a particular cut-off point regarding population size when defining small states and examining these special socio-cultural characteristics. Instead, there is evidence for a 'continuum of size'; these mechanisms become more apparent the smaller the population becomes,

regardless of other traits in the state (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019; Sarapuu 2010; Bray & Packer 1993). Put simply, this does not mean that the small state traits linked to human resources and social ecology will not be present to some degree in the larger states as well, but rather that they become *more dominant the smaller the population becomes*.

In her review of existing studies of small states, Sarapuu (2010) defined five traits of small states in relation to public administration, which can be linked to the limited availability of resources and the particular social ecology: 1) limited scope of activity, 2) multi-functionalism, 3) reliance on informal structures, 4) constraints on steering and control, and finally 5) higher personalism. These traits, based on various studies on small states, highlight key differences between the smaller and larger states, with a focus on socio-cultural factors linked to individuals and relationships. The emphasis now turns to how I used this literature in relation to the empirical findings from the Icelandic case concerning the relationship between media and politics.

8.2. Four dimensions factoring smallness into the equation

This section examines underlying socio-cultural assumptions in the existing political communication literature on the national level, and how the Icelandic case shows how the size factor complicates these assumptions. It discusses possible ways to *expand* the frameworks of study for future research on small states. How size influences these areas of study needs to be recognised. At the same time, I am not arguing that size and smallness can explain everything. As previous chapters showed, there are also various similarities between Iceland and the larger states previously studied. And there are many points unique to Iceland, as will be summarised in the next chapter. The four dimensions outlined here simply show how certain underlying assumptions are not compatible with the Icelandic case, linked specifically to its smallness, and existing research from other small states. Moreover, they illustrate different types of frameworks that can be used for future studies on small states.

Offline network density

The first dimension confronts the following assumption in much of the existing political communication literature on the national level: *Media and political elites routinely operate in private spheres that are detached from the public*. In political communication research, this separation has been understood to influence the relationship between politicians and journalists and how political news content is shaped. The politician-journalist relationship has often been examined in relation to private spheres such as Westminster, Capitol Hill, or the Folketing in Denmark, both through individual case studies and in comparative studies (e.g. Dindler 2015; Van Aelst et al. 2010). This is where the professional closeness between the two sides has raised various questions, such as how proximity in this private elite setting possibly impairs journalists' independence and their capacity to be critical. Recent analysis on how journalists have become *active in politics itself* is founded on the assumption that intense interactions between journalists and politicians take place in these types of settings.

I argue that this private sphere framework has limitations when examining politician-journalist relations in small states. As shown earlier, a closed off parliamentary 'bubble' like this simply does not exist in Iceland. There is currently one journalist based in the parliament and most of the daily working interactions between journalists and politicians do not take place there. But this does not mean that politicians and journalists are not close. They are, in fact, very close. In a small society, it is much more likely that you previously know people you need to work with professionally, or that you know someone who knows that person. People in small states need to learn how to get along with people they will know throughout their lives in many different contexts. It is not only the small size of the state but also the durability of most relationships that fosters sophisticated modes of conduct (Lowenthal 1987). What makes small societies different from the larger ones are multiple role relationships, and these can lead to intense closeness on many levels (Benedict 1966). You might know someone from school, have mutual friends from your university days, and then suddenly you end up working together. In between this, you might bump into one another in the hot tub or at the supermarket.

This multiple role socio-cultural closeness cannot be understood by ignoring the size variable. As shown in chapter 6, Icelandic politicians and journalists do not interact much in the parliament and are instead much more likely to see each other in various settings outside of the workplace. What emerged as a theme in my interviews was that Icelandic society is perceived, to an extent, as one large and *dense network*. Boundaries are blurred, and it is therefore challenging to try to separate areas of examination into closed off private spheres, as much of the existing politician-journalist literature from the larger states does.

A key finding from Corbett and Veenendaal's (2018) recent comparative study of democracy in 39 of the world's smallest states can be directly related to this finding. They show how, in small states, *the public sphere is expanded*. What they mean by this is that small states tend to have weak institutional structures. Instead of following what takes place in these formal institutional bodies, what matters much more in the functioning of politics in small states are the informal dynamics that exist in these societies more generally. They show that overlapping public and private relationships between politicians and citizens are key to understanding what takes place and how politics operates in people's daily lives. Linking this specifically to the size variable, they state that, 'simply for numerical reasons this particular feature of political personalism is unlikely to be emulated in larger democracies' (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018, p. 174).

So what does this mean specifically for examining the relationship between journalists and politicians in smaller states? I argue that, instead of focusing on their intense professional interactions within institutional sites of power, we need to expand how we conceptualise the relationship. It is not mainly based on professional closeness. Instead, the social closeness factor related to size shows that we need to examine how social proximity, as well as proximity to the public, affects their relationship. This is a key difference from the studies in larger states, where the public is routinely ignored when examining politician-journalist relations.

This expanded examination raises different types of questions than the exisiting work. For example, to what extent does the *social* closeness (in contrast to the professional closeness in the existing literature) impact the journalists' potential to be an impartial watchdog? How does the proximity to the public impact *who sets the agenda* in the relationship between politicians and journalists? And, related to this, how does this impact the *content* of political coverage? As discussed earlier in the thesis, a common observation in the interviews in Iceland was that the public and various groups could quite easily put issues on the national agenda. This has implications that could be explored in subsequent research. On the one hand, it is easier for the public to engage with those in power and express their concerns, and this should therefore enhance democracy. However, at the same time, it can make it much easier for powerful special interest groups to influence politics, journalism, and political coverage. This can be related back to the idea of how smallness can stifle pluralism (Baldacchino 2012). Small states are likely to lack a critical mass of institutionalised interest groups that could balance each other out in the political discourse (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019).

I argue that this network density dimension needs, moreover, to be understood in relation to the weak position of the legacy media. As discussed earlier, small media systems are structurally more vulnerable than larger ones, and the legacy media is in a much weaker position than in larger states because of the small media market. In relation to the socio-cultural aspects discussed here, it can moreover be argued that, because of the proximity between elites and the public, the legacy media can be seen as less of an essential public sphere mediator in small states than in larger ones. Put simply, it is not only in a structurally weaker position, but also not as important when it comes to mediating interactions between people. This suggests that it might be even more essential to probe the more informal socio-cultural political communication dynamics in smaller states. The underlying assumption concerning the legacy media in much of the existing political communication literature is summed up succinctly by Strömback (2008, p. 229): 'Nowadays, the media have become the most important source of

information for most people in advanced democracies around the world.' I argue that this is not necessarily the case in the world's smallest states.

In sum, when examining politician-journalist relations in small states, I propose that it would be fruitful to examine the informal aspects as they relate to the wider society. And when investigating the legacy media, its role needs to be understood in the context of the network density dimension. This is similar to the position taken by Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) in their examination of democracy in small states. A key limitation of their work is the lack of engagement concerning issues related to the media. The media is mentioned very briefly and sporadically with regard to its weak position. I argue that it needs to be examined systematically in relation to the *politician-journalist-public* personalised small state interactions, if we want to get a fuller picture of the functioning of democracy in small states.

Maurer and Beiler (2018) discuss previous research focusing on the relationship between journalists and politicians on the local level and argue that familiarity, friendliness and other results are probably due to the fact that the interactions were analysed on the municipal level rather than the national level (e.g. Larsson 2002). This is not the case when it comes to Iceland and illustrates well how assumptions are made concerning the national level and blind spots in analysis that can occur if smaller states are missing from the existing literature. At the same time, it shows how it can potentially be fruitful to engage in collaborative work between those studying small states and the more local level in larger states when it comes to the relationship between journalists and politicians, as discussed in the concluding chapter. This is also the case when it comes to the online small state social ecology.

Online network density
This second dimension is similar to the first one but moves the discussion to underlying assumptions in the ever-expanding literature concerning online political communication interactions. Much of the existing work shows the following: Politicians mainly engage in public one-way digital broadcast style

communication and there is limited engagement with citizens online (e.g. Jungherr 2016). I argue that an underlying assumption guides much of this work: *There is a level of distance between politicians and citizens offline which is replicated in the online communication ecology*.

As shown in chapter 7, debates concerning the democratic potential of the internet have often been discussed in terms of 'techno-optimism' and 'techno-pessimism'. On the optimist side, much of the literature has focused on the internet's *potential* in *breaking down barriers* between politicians and citizens. This can be seen to enhance democracy, since one of the most well-documented causes for citizen's disconnection from politics is the view that they have no say in political affairs.

The argument against the internet being a democratic enhancer is commonly discussed in connection to wider societal inequalities. This can be related to the 'normalisation hypothesis', which focuses on how relationship patterns online come to resemble those of the real world (e.g. Koc-Michalska et al. 2016). What most of the empirical studies on politicians' behaviour on social media reveal is that they interact infrequently with other users. Research has revealed a status quo in online campaigning, since politicians mainly replicated messages and campaign modes online and engaged in a very limited way with users (e.g. Stier et al. 2018; Glassman 2010). This suggest a much stronger case for the normalisation hypothesis as opposed to the democracy enhancing two-way interaction argument.

I argue that there is a key limitation in this research which is linked to the exclusion of small states. Their inclusion would expand the normalisation argument and the framework of study. Before addressing this in more detail, it is important to point out that of course not all small states have the same sort of internet penetration rates as Iceland (virtually 100%). Much of the criticism concerning the enhancement potential of the internet focuses on a digital divide and lack of access (e.g. Curran 2016). I am not disputing this part of the argument. Instead, what I am asking is the following: If we follow the normalisation

argument, what should we expect to find in the online communication ecology in small states (for those who have access to the internet)?

As discussed in relation to the offline network density dimension, there is much more closeness between elites and citizens in small states. The real story of small state politics concerns informal dynamics in a range of settings (Corbett & Veenendaal 2018). When studying interactions online, one should therefore find similar sorts of dynamics. As shown in chapter 7, this is indeed the case in Iceland. Politicians usage of social media is very informal with most simply using their personal Facebook profiles to disseminate information and engage with others. What the study revealed is that much of the engagement with the public takes place informally, in private, through Facebook Messenger.

If we want to explore what is taking place in interactions between politicians, journalists and the public in small states, I argue that we need to expand areas of study to include these more private settings. As examined earlier in the thesis, research on the internet and social media in relation to political communication has mainly focused on publicly available digital trace data and, therefore, missed the more semi-private and private settings. Studying these settings requires a different way of studying the engagement between politicians, journalists and citizens than has been routinely done on social media. Researchers cannot simply rely on digital trace data. Focus groups, interviews and various types of ethnographic research are useful in order to comprehend these small state online dynamics.

Group chat on social messaging platforms, as well as on Facebook groups, has played an increasing role in local news media ecologies (Nygren et al. 2018), and it has been shown that local politicians participate more in two-way interaction with the public than politicians on the national level (Larsson & Skogerbø 2018). Why might there be more interaction there? The size factor should play an important role, if we follow the normalisation argument. In the interviews detailed in chapter 7, Icelandic politicians told me that they felt that people often *expected* them to respond because they are used to being in such close proximity

to them in the offline world. This contradicts the assumption of much of the mainstream scholarship as summed up by Tromble (2018) in a recent article. She states that citizens do not necessarily expect a response from politicians on social media when reacting to their posts. She argues that this is because people are used to top-down communication.

If we are to include smaller states in future research, we need to expand this to also include the possibility that citizens in these settings might in fact very much *expect a response from politicians*. And these two-way interactions could take place in the more public settings on social media, or more privately in groups or one-to-one conversations on messaging apps like Messenger and WhatsApp. It is worth noting here that these apps are gaining more scholarly attention in the larger states, as I discussed in the last chapter. The emerging research on the more private behaviour online, however, mostly focuses on how citizens are communicating with each other – *not* engagements between elites and the public. The inclusion of small states could, therefore, substantially enrich this emerging area of research. There should be more blurred boundaries and intense interactions between elites and the public in small states than the previous research from the larger states illustrates. If the public is used to interactions with elites offline, why should people not expect politicians to respond to their comments online?

As with the offline network density dimension, I argue that this also needs to be examined in relation to the weak position of the legacy media. Because of the proximity between elites and the public, the legacy media can, to an extent, be seen as less of an essential public sphere mediator than in larger states. It was clearly evident in my findings that much of the political discussion in Iceland has now moved online, and is routinely disseminated somewhat unfiltered via the weak legacy media outlets. In addition, the legacy media is routinely bypassed and ignored in favour of social media channels. This again raises the following issue: On the one hand, it is easier for the public to express their concerns, and this should therefore enhance democracy. However, at the same time, it can also make it much easier for politicians and special interest groups to influence

political coverage through social media. This is linked to the working conditions of journalists and politicians, as the next dimension focuses on.

Mobile multifunctionality

The third dimension confronts the following underlying assumption in much of the existing political communication literature on the national level: *The degree of specialisation can allow political journalists to work mainly on stories related to politics.* When examining the literature on the politician-journalist relationship, it quickly becomes apparent that 'political journalist' is assumed to be a useful term for comparative analysis across states. This is routinely discussed with regard to journalists who work in national parliaments (e.g. Albæk et al. 2014; Van Aelst et al. 2010). Related to this, the previous discussion concerning journalists and politicians operating in detached private spheres illustrates how journalists are seen to specialise in politics, even to the extent that they *inform politicians about political matters* and contribute to the social construction of politics itself. I argue that this conceptualisation of the political journalist has its limitations when examining smaller states like Iceland. This is because it does not capture the essence of the working conditions in journalism as they relate to political coverage. Moreover, the work of politicians in small states is also different in terms of specialisation.

In his study of MPs, ministers, journalists and officials in the United Kingdom, Davis (2010, p. 156) found that they 'were influenced by the social conditions of their occupations.' This was also the case with the politicians and journalists studied in Iceland, but these conditions drastically differ from those in the United Kingdom and other larger states. To many in Iceland, working as a journalist is seen as a temporary stepping stone before the journalist starts his or her 'real' job. This was highlighted in interviews with journalists. It is common for young people to work in the media for a few years before leaving for better paid work. There is little room for specialisation and over 90% of the journalists interviewed described themselves as generalists. It is worth noting that several of the journalists who were interviewed for this thesis have now moved on to other areas of work. And the author of the thesis is a former journalist in Iceland.

The fact that there is little room for specialisation in journalism can be linked directly to the small media market in Iceland. In a market as small as the Icelandic one, there is little room for readership segregation based on purchasing capacity and other socio-economic divisions. It was noted in most of the interviews that the media outlets in Iceland are simply too small for journalists to become specialists, since resources are insufficient. Inadequacy of resources is highlighted as one of the key structural peculiarities of small media systems according to Puppis (2009), as outlined in chapter 2.

Örnebring and Lauk (2010) emphasise that recent comparative studies of journalism pay virtually no attention to the relative size of the journalistic population. Their study on Estonian journalists shows that the shortage of resources for producing content immediately influences the distribution of tasks in the editorial office, the personal duties of each journalist and how journalists work. Their research illustrates that there is relatively little specialisation among Estonian journalists: 63% of them sometime work on stories outside their specialist area, with nearly a third doing so weekly or more often. The latter is true for only about 15% of journalists in the United Kingdom, and 19% Swedish journalists, according to the study.

The interview answers suggest that the Icelandic case was even more extreme than the Estonian one when the study took place. Perhaps this is not surprising, since Iceland's population is around one quarter of Estonia's population (Statistics Iceland 2019; The World Factbook 2019d). The continuum of size definition therefore appears to capture the essence of the working conditions very well. Research from small states in other areas supports this multifunctionality theme. Sarapuu (2010) has previously outlined this in relation to work from public administration and governance. It has been shown that the small size of states limits specialisation, and it is common for senior officials in small states to be responsible for several sectors, which in larger countries are administered by separate divisions (Farrugia 1993). Small states tend to have more multifunctional ministries and there is often no clear-cut division between policy formation and implementation. Furthermore, 'in smaller states the

bureaucrats can also be expected to be more influential policy-makers than their colleagues in the larger states. That contributes further to the blurring of lines between administering and political decision-making' (Sarapuu 2010, p. 35).

Small states need most of the basic types of personnel required in larger states, but they are needed in smaller numbers (Randma 2001). Small organisations may not be able to hire full-time specialists, so the incentive is to focus more on multifunctional generalists. Multi-functionalism is, of course, also required in larger states, but research shows that it becomes more important as the scale of the population gets smaller (e.g. Bray 1991). In other words, the smaller the state in terms of population, the more multifunctional the roles become. Generalists are much more useful in this setting than specialists.

It is, therefore, not surprising that my interviews also revealed that most Icelandic MPs are generalists. Over 90% of the politicians described themselves in this way. This was usually linked to resource constraints and overwhelming work demands directly related to the small size of the Icelandic society, as was in the case of the journalists. Most MPs do not have any members of staff and this lack of support results in the MPs having to educate themselves on most matters (and they do not have journalists to 'help out' as Davis (2010) found to be the case in the United Kingdom). Moreover, the smallness of the Icelandic parliament means that they have to be flexible and know a little about most areas. Many interviewees contrasted this with the working conditions of MPs they know in larger countries, as outlined in chapter 6.

So, what does this dimension mean for political communication frameworks? I argue that most journalists and politicians in small states simply need to be multifunctional generalists rather than specialists in more specific areas. As stated, multi-functionalism is, of course, also required in larger states, but existing research suggests that it becomes more exaggerated in small states (Randma-Liiv & Sarapuu 2019). It was a dominant theme in my interviews that resource constraints seriously impair Icelandic journalists' possibilities for in-depth reporting on politics. This was seen by many journalists to give more

power to politicians when it comes to political coverage and was perceived by interviewees to limit the possibility for the media to be a watchdog. What was, however, also apparent is that politicians are grappling with resource constraints in their everyday work environment, and this can limit their dominance.

The small state working conditions can be seen to contribute to thin and superficial knowledge in the political sphere, which is then covered by overworked and often inexperienced journalists who might not know much about politics. And, again, as with the previous two dimensions, this appears to open up avenues for the public and special interest groups to put issues on the agenda. Resource constraints and the lack of specialisation were perceived to create a vacuum that can be filled by 'outside' voices. It is difficult for journalists to be critical gatekeepers if they know little about the areas in which they work. I argue that future research should therefore examine the news outputs in relation to these working conditions and show an awareness for how outsiders can influence the news coverage. This leads to the final dimension, which concerns the roles and responsibilities of *individuals* in small states.

Flexible autonomy

In existing national level political communication research, the 'unit of analysis' is often something that exists 'above' the individual, such as the media outlet and political party. For example, emphasis is placed on examining differences between how certain media outlets cover political stories, their credibility and bias, how politicians from different political parties behave, how different parties are covered in the news and so forth (e.g. Stroud & Lee 2013; Strömback & Kaid 2008). The focus is therefore not on the individuals as such, but rather on the units in which they operate. These units can be perceived as some sort of explanatory variable regarding the individuals' behaviour. There appears, therefore, to be an underlying assumption in some of this literature in that *the professional roles journalists and politicians play can, at least to a degree, be studied without taking into account the actual individuals who take on these roles*. In other words, the professional roles exist first, and then certain people fill these roles in relation to some pre-existing norms of behaviour. I argue that when

examining the roles played by individuals in small states there is a need to frame this somewhat differently.

It became apparent in my interviews that Icelandic politicians and journalists have much room to manoeuvre in their everyday working practices and often lack guidance and support. This is similar to previous findings from public administration research. Small state administrations tend to rely more on flexibility, and the interaction between units is often characterised by a lack of machinery for formal coordination and heavier reliance on informal means of communication (Raadschelders 1992). When many intervening management levels are missing, problematic issues will quickly reach the very top of the administration. There is, therefore, an incentive built into the small systems to trust the competence of individual officials and units (Sarapuu 2010). This seems to be the case in the media and political spheres in Iceland.

As shown earlier, most of the journalists mentioned that they have considerable agenda-setting power when deciding what to cover. There often seems to be little or no editorial guidance and the journalists are almost expected to perform as soloists with scant input from co-workers and those in charge. Similarly, the MPs shared that they are often very isolated in their work and do not have members of staff to help them out. This allows them a good deal of flexibility when it comes to what they work on. Furthermore, they can usually disseminate their work themselves (usually on Facebook or in articles in the newspapers), without discussing it with the political parties they represent. The interviews revealed that the political parties are short-staffed and most of the work done by staff members concerns logistics. There is little emphasis placed on creating overall PR strategies for the political parties.

What this flexible autonomy suggests is that individuals, working outside of hierarchical structures, play a key role in political communication dynamics. This leads to the realisation that when examining small states it is important to study the individuals themselves much more closely than done in much of the research in larger states. This can be related back to the discussion concerning multiple

role relationships in the network density dimensions. People in small states interact over and over again, in all sorts of situations, which can lead to more particularistic identities. This can apply both to the more personal and professional relations between people. In short, this suggest that what matters more is *who the person* is rather than *what she does* and can be contrasted to the more universalistic identities in larger states. These types of identities emphasise that what the person does is of importance, and can be linked to the Weberian basis of modern government. In smaller states, who the person is much more important since 'everybody knows everybody'.

This can, for example, be shown in existing research from the civil service in Estonia. In her interviews with Estonian civil servants, Randma (2001) found that the high level of personalisation makes jobs and units very unstable. Tasks and jobs are often created with specific people in mind. This again is related to personalism, which simply means that the role of the individual takes greater significance, as previously shown. The Estonian case shows how tasks and units can 'move' *with the individuals*. My research suggests, similarly, how one journalist at a particular media outlet can put particular political issues on the agenda, but then, if this journalist moves to another outlet, similar future stories will 'move' with this particular journalist to the next outlet. In this case, the individual is more relevant to understanding the news reports than the outlets at which she or he is working. At the same time, a particular MP interested in a specific issue can easily put it on the agenda without it being approved by the (almost non-existent) political party hierarchy.

I am not arguing that different political parties and media outlets are not relevant. As noted in my research, they clearly are. For example, there were differences in the working conditions at *RÚV* compared to the working conditions of journalists at the other media outlets, and there were differences in behaviour between MPs in the opposition and government parties. Those in opposition were much more likely to 'perform speeches' for the media in order to get attention and criticise the government. What I am suggesting, however, is that in smaller states the role

of the individual is much more autonomous and flexible than in larger states, and this needs to be factored into the future research agenda on small states.

Conclusions

As mentioned at the start, the dimensions presented here concerning scaled down political communication dynamics are not meant to be all-encompassing. The aim is for these four dimensions to jointly provide a useful roadmap to explore important avenues of study concerning smaller states. Starting with the underlying assumptions illustrated in earlier chapters, I asked a simple question: What might change in these presumptions if the states under investigation were smaller states as opposed to larger ones? Overall, the four dimensions jointly point to two important ways that these assumptions need to be *expanded* in order to study small states, which have been routinely ignored in the political communication literature. First, there is a need to *blur the boundaries* concerning elites and citizens. They are much closer in small states than in larger states and this has implications in how we should study offline and online political communication. We cannot simply examine elites in isolation and then citizens separately. Interactions between citizens and elites form a crucial foundation to understanding scaled down political communication networks. Second, because of the closeness factor, there is a need to expand the focus to include more *informal channels* of political communication and the *individuals* who participate in the process.

The four dimensions were guided by a more fundamental underlying question: What might the political communication discipline look like if it included small states in its research? I suggest that this would show much more emphasis placed on actually talking to people and observing what they do informally in order to understand the political dynamics in these small states. Moreover, the role of the media would need to be understood in relation to the more informal dynamics. As mentioned, the legacy media is seen as somewhat of a less fundamental public sphere mediator in small states than larger states because of the proximity

between people. It is still very important, but needs to be understood and researched in the context it operates in.

Reverting back to the ideals of the news media, my findings show the overwhelming perception that the social proximity between people can complicate the media's watchdog role. This is different than the professional closeness shown between politicians and journalists in larger states. Furthermore, concerning the media's role in informing people and staging a debate, it is clear that people have easier access to this platform than in larger states. This can enhance democracy but, at the same time, make it possible for special interest groups to dictate the coverage from the 'outside'. And, finally, regarding the idea that the media represents the people between elections, it can be argued that this is less of an important role for the media in smaller states than larger ones. People can reach politicians much more easily and hold them to account, offline and online, without the mediating role of the news media.

This chapter has expanded frameworks on two fronts. Political communication researchers have mostly ignored the world's smallest states and it is moreover the case that scholars studying the world's smallest states have yet to systematically study political communication in these states. Much of the current literature on political communication focuses on the breakdown of the legacy media and the 'crisis' of democracy in some manner (e.g. Davis 2019). I argue that we can add an important dimension to understanding this crisis in the world today by including small states in future research. If democracy really is at a crossroads, then we need to examine it in a range of settings. And by including small states, we understand more clearly the effects that size can have. As Corbett and Veenendaal (2018) argue, as the average size of countries around the globe continues to fall, and the call for power to be devolved to localised authorities grows, it is increasingly important to factor size into the equation. Aside from this, we are wasting valuable data by ignoring the small states in comparative research more generally.

If we ignore the world's smallest states, we are missing out on understanding what studying the smallest states can potentially tell us that studying the larger states cannot. This narrows the discussion back to Iceland and the overall conclusions presented in the final chapter. What might the Icelandic case tell us about political communication developments more generally, in the larger democracies of the world?

CHAPTER 9:
Conclusion – The Icelandic case and wider implications

As outlined in the introduction, the first aim of the thesis was to fill three interlinked research gaps on Iceland. What these gaps have in common is that they jointly help us to understand *the dissemination of political information in the public sphere in Iceland and what this can mean for the functioning of democracy in the country*. This concluding chapter begins by summarising the main findings on Iceland in relation to these three gaps. Subsequently, the chapter outlines what the findings on the Icelandic case can potentially tell us about other small states. This is linked to the second aim of the thesis, which focused on expanding the political communication discipline by breaking apart key assumptions in the wider literature, since these assumptions have mostly been based on analysis from large and medium sized western democracies. This opens up new areas of investigation that can enrich the research agenda of the discipline. Following this, wider implications and avenues for further research are discussed and the following question is asked: Can the Icelandic case potentially tell us something about developments in larger democracies, as well as the smaller ones?

What does the Icelandic case reveal?

The first area of the 'gap filling' research focused on perceptions concerning routine political coverage in the legacy news media in Iceland. This was evaluated in relation to the ideal democratic roles of holding those in power to account, staging an open and plural debate on important issues, and representing the people (Curran 2002). Two broad research questions guided the explorative research in relation to this. The first, devised with the qualitative material in mind, focused on *how journalists and politicians in Iceland perceive political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media and how the coverage is seen to affect their working practices.* The second question, formulated with the quantitative data in mind, highlighted *how the public in Iceland perceives political coverage in the Icelandic legacy media.*

The research made an intervention into the wider literature concerning the breakdown of legacy news outlets. As I argued, since Iceland is one of the five

Nordic countries, one would assume that it would be in a somewhat better position to respond to the crisis of the news media than other states. The rich Nordic states have supported public and private outlets more than many other states and seen them flourish as successful businesses, whilst providing users with socially relevant content (Syvertsen et al. 2014). My intervention, however, showed the opposite to be the case. Iceland has been in a particularly fragile position when it comes to confronting the breakdown of the legacy news media. The country has routinely been ignored by political communication scholars and the difference between it and the other four Nordic countries is therefore often missed.

Iceland is by far the most commercialised of the five Nordic countries when it comes to its media market (Ahva et al. 2017). Corporatism is less developed in Iceland than in the other four countries, and state involvement has, up until now, been limited to *RÚV*, its public broadcasting service, whilst all other media have been based on commercial grounds. And *RÚV* is more commercialised than PBS stations in the other Nordic countries. It has, from its foundation in 1930, been allowed to carry advertisements and advertising sales amount to approximately 1/3 of its revenue. In this sense, *RÚV* has always also been a commercial station (Broddason & Karlsson 2005). Iceland's media market therefore 'does not fit into the model of an active state vis-a-vis the media that is commonly used to describe the Nordic media system' (Ohlsson 2015, p. 27).

The mix of smallness and mainly commercial funding models in Iceland is, according to my interviews with journalists and politicians, seen as leading to even more superficial and problematic coverage than in larger states. This situation only became magnified following the financial crisis. The coverage in other states is considered problematic as well, when judged against the ideal democratic roles of the media, but also perceived to include more in-depth and diverse material. The survey answers illustrated that the public does, to a large extent, appear to agree with politicians and journalists concerning the superficial media content in Iceland.

Most interviewees did not seem to find it difficult to generalise about the media market as a whole, although *RÚV*, *Stundin* and *Kjarninn* (the latter two are small outlets founded by journalists following the financial crisis) were often mentioned as examples of outlets doing a better job of disseminating important political information and holding those in power to account. What clearly emerged as a theme, overall, was a heavily homogenised small media system, very different from the ideals of media pluralism that highlight the democratic importance of a range of different voices being heard.

The fact that the data collection was based around routine political coverage led to some important findings. Problems associated with ownership concentration and political parallelism were discussed much more often in relation to big events like elections and divisive pieces of legislation. Based on my findings, I argue that academics must be careful not to overemphasise key events being representative of political coverage overall. The research here showed how the mundane is, to an extent, perceived in a different way than other types of political coverage centred around big events. On the one hand, ownership and bias were regarded as important and problematic during these events. On the other hand, certain outlets were seen to 'step up their game' during the atypical moments, although only for a limited time, after which things went back to the routinely 'normal'.

Interviewee perceptions underlined the difficulties for journalists in Iceland in fulfilling the watchdog role and serving as an agency of information and debate. Superficial, homogenised and reactive coverage are clearly the opposite of what is required of the media according to these normative democratic ideals. Perceptions concerning the media's role in representing people to authority highlight the media's failure here as well. It is much more focused on reacting to what politicians say and do rather than supervising them on behalf of the people.

In sum, in relation to the first research gap focused on perceptions concerning *routine* legacy media coverage of politics, my research revealed that Icelandic politicians, journalists and the public have very similar perceptions overall. The coverage is seen to be superficial, shallow, and lacking in analysis and informed

criticism. There is too much emphasis placed on sound bite friendly speeches and politicians frequently adapt their political behaviour to suit the needs of the media. This has an impact on politics itself. It becomes more superficial and less focused on policy debates and analysis.

The qualitative findings from the interviews additionally revealed that political coverage in Iceland is perceived to be heavily 'event-based', and that outside groups can gain traction by initiating particular types of criticism, and by putting issues on the agenda. The watchdog role, then, is often not really carried out by the journalists. Instead, special interest groups, 'opinion leaders', and members of the public put issues on the agenda, and they are then often given free rein to say what they want in the news reports. There is often very little gatekeeping carried out and this was linked to 'she said/he said' coverage. One group says one thing, and someone from another group says the opposite. The journalist disseminates the material and then commonly the story is over. Following the financial crisis, this watchdog vacuum was often filled by critical voices, resulting in more critical political coverage on those in power. Conversely, this vacuum can also be filled by special interest groups pushing a particular agenda, not necessarily in the public interest.

The research focused on the second gap examined the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland, and their interactions with the public. This was guided by two broad research questions. The first, devised with the interview material in mind, examined *the nature of the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland*. The research made an intervention into existing debates concerning the journalist-politician relationship. Much of the existing literature has emphasised the two sides existing in a private 'bubble', excluding the public. Studies have shown how professional closeness can create problems concerning impartiality and critical coverage, and how the intense interactions between the two sides means that journalists become participants in politics itself within these sites of power (e.g. Dindler 2015). I illustrated that the Icelandic case differs from this in two fundamental ways. First, it is the *social* closeness that needs to be examined more closely (not the professional

relationship), and, second, that the relationship cannot be examined without taking into account the role of the public, since boundaries between elites and citizens are far more blurred in small states like Iceland. A second research questions was therefore devised, which focused on examining *the nature of the relationship between politicians, journalists and the public* in Iceland, using both the interview material and the survey data.

Building on the foundation concerning the perceived impact of the small commercialised media market on routine political coverage (as highlighted in the previous research gap), the thesis *extended* the smallness variable from the structural focus on the media market to *socio-cultural* aspects concerning relationships between journalists, politicians and the public. I argue that this deepens the understanding of the perceived reasons behind superficial political coverage in Iceland, and highlights further challenges as regards the ideal democratic roles of the media.

My findings showed how the small state social ecology can potentially make it challenging for journalists to be impartial and critical when covering politics. It can be difficult for the watchdog to bark if it is too close to those it should be watching. At the same time, the interviews highlighted how 'short chains of command' can make it easier to access people and information in Iceland, compared to the larger states. This was discussed positively in relation to information dissemination in the media. This advantage can, however, be quite irrelevant if journalists do not know what they are looking for, or do not have time to look for it. Interviewees emphasised how politicians and journalists are mainly mobile generalists and their working conditions make it difficult for them to become specialists. It can be challenging to produce in-depth material on politics if you do not know the topic you are covering.

The more senior politicians and journalists, who could comment on how political coverage and the relationship between journalists and politicians has developed, observed that the decline of the party press, and more recently the lack of resources, has in general resulted in much more distance and less daily work-

related interactions with journalists. According to the senior politicians and journalists, this means that the political coverage is more superficial than it used to be and often lacking the necessary context. The increasing pressure for instant responses contributes to this.

Put simply, there is less time for the media to monitor those in power, and this diminishes the watchdog role of the media. Again, the difference between the routine coverage and the more atypical moments was highlighted. Many interviewees mentioned that the media often does a good job when big events take place, such as the Panama Papers scandal. During this time, the Icelandic parliament filled up with journalists for a few days, producing abundant quality coverage. But this was considered to be purely a short-term situation. On a more routine day in the parliament, journalists are not permanently based there. That is, apart from the *one journalist from RÚV* who is supposed to monitor what is going on.

My research showed that the role of the public in the relationship between journalists and politicians needs to be understood in relation to three key aspects: *professional distance* between politicians and journalists; their *lack of specialisation*; and *blurred boundaries* between politicians, journalists and citizens in Iceland. These aspects were perceived to enable the public to substantially influence political coverage, as well as the work of politicians and journalists. Citizens can quickly put issues on the agenda, which is often welcomed from uninformed, non-specialist journalists and overworked, generalist politicians. This can happen through unofficial meetings and random encounters with politicians and journalists, since people are constantly running into each other in Iceland. My research revealed, however, that the most common setting for this to take place is online.

Facebook is a key mediator for political dissemination in Iceland. This was shown when filling the third research gap. It was guided by a broad research question focused on *how social networking sites are perceived to have impacted routine political coverage and interactions between politicians, journalists and the public*

in Iceland. This engaged with the themes presented in the earlier chapters and used both the qualitative and quantitative material. It quickly became clear that, when talking about social networking sites, most interviewees were mainly referring to Facebook. This is not surprising, since it is by far the most dominant social network in Iceland, with 93% of Icelanders using it regularly (Markaðs- og miðlarannsóknir 2018).

This part of my research made an intervention into the wider literature in two key ways. It was shown that the argument against the internet being a democratic enhancer is often associated with wider societal inequalities and a digital divide. This is routinely linked to the argument that existing and unequal power relationships are present online similarly to how they are offline. I showed how Iceland is an ideal case to counter this argument. The society is much more equal in comparison to the larger western democratic usually studied, and internet usage is virtually 100% (Eurostat 2019; OECD 2017). Moreover, I made another intervention into these debates by arguing that too much emphasis has been placed on the public aspects of political engagement on social media.

According to my research, journalists and politicians are both optimistic and pessimistic when it comes to social media's impact on routine political coverage and dissemination, as are the public. Social media is seen to have made people more informed about politics, but most people do not participate in debates, and these debates are often not seen as constructive. It quickly became clear that Icelandic journalists are often frustrated with how politicians use the platform, and the responses are, to an extent, reminiscent of the one-way broadcast style in larger states (e.g. Graham et al. 2013).

Icelandic journalists perceive politicians to have a well thought out digital strategy that often circumvents the legacy media outlets but politicians have a very different assessment of their own Facebook usage. A majority indicated that they do not really see themselves as knowing what they are doing. Most of them mainly use their personal profiles, where everything becomes 'mixed up' and they do not have a particular strategy with how they use social media.

The increased opportunity for politicians to completely bypass journalists and the legacy media leads to problems concerning the democratic watchdog role of the media. There is less interrogation that takes place, and instead, accountability becomes more about visibility. That is, people can criticise politicians 'out in the open', but, as the research revealed, this criticism is not necessarily taken seriously on Facebook. Journalists' gatekeeping and dissemination role is also diminished if politicians do not need them as much as they used to. The politician can now simply go on Facebook and tell people what she or he is doing. This issue is exaggerated in Iceland because of the weak position of the legacy media and close proximity between politicians and citizens.

My research found, moreover, that Icelandic journalists and politicians communicate extensively on Facebook Messenger. It appears to be the 'space' where much of the actual engagement takes place, decisions are made, interviews are conducted and so on. And the public is an active participant in this setting. For example, people contact representatives to ask about particular issues or to pass on relevant information concerning issues on which MPs might be working. It was revealed that 8% of the Icelandic population sent politicians a private message on Facebook Messenger in the twelve-month period before the survey was sent out. Put simply, what became apparent through my research is that the *public* behaviour of politicians is seen to resemble the more top-down 'broadcast style', whilst the *private* behaviour is more two-way and interactive. I defined this as a 'two-level online sphere', with the more public interactions taking place on the first level and the private on the second. So, where then, does this leave us?

Wider implications: From small states to larger ones
Following the research to fill the gaps, I used relevant findings from the three empirical chapters on Iceland to expand media and political frameworks so that they are better able to capture important dynamics in small states more generally. These dynamics draw attention to the *qualitative differences between small and large states that can be linked to size*. This was done through the construction of explorative small state political communication frameworks. They highlight *four dimensions of 'scaled down' political communication dynamics*.

These are: offline network density, online network density, multifunctional mobility and flexible autonomy.

Overall, the four dimensions jointly point to two important ways that existing assumptions in political communication research need to be *expanded* in order to study small states. First, there is a need to *blur the boundaries* concerning elites and citizens. They are much closer in small states than in larger states, and this has implications in how we should study both offline and online political communication. We cannot simply examine elites in isolation and then citizens separately. Interactions between citizens and elites form a crucial foundation to understanding scaled down political communication dynamics. Second, because of the closeness factor, there is a need to expand the focus to include more *informal channels* of political communication and the *individuals* who participate in the process.

The four dimensions were related to the 'continuum of size' definition of small states, concerning a specific type of *small state social ecology* and *resource constraints*. The argument is not to adopt a particular cut-off point regarding population size when defining small states and examining these special characteristics. Instead, there is evidence from existing research that these mechanisms become more apparent the smaller the population becomes, regardless of other traits in the state (e.g. Bray & Packer 1993). Put simply, this does not mean that the small state traits linked to human resources and social ecology will not be present to some degree in the larger states as well, but rather that they become *more dominant the smaller the population becomes*.

Larger states: Local level
The continuum of size definition is not solely applicable to small states. I argue that it can, to an extent, be expanded to sub-state local communities in larger states. This is based on the sociology of size introduced by Benedict (1966). He argued that the criteria for the size of societies are the number and quality of role relationships. In a small-scale society, the individual interacts over and over again with the same individual in all sorts of social situations, whilst in a larger society

the individual has many impersonal or part-relationships. Benedict argued that small societies do not just exist in small states but also in larger states that have a high degree of segmentation. I therefore suggest that the 'scaled down' dimensions presented in the previous chapter can, to an extent, also be helpful in examining political communication dynamics in these sorts of local communities.

Local journalism has been studied much less than journalism on the national level, at least in a European context. As Cushion (2012, p. 80) writes, 'studies into national and international news have tended to overshadow attention towards more localized journalism.' At the same time, international relations scholarship highlights that the sub-state level is becoming an increasingly important area of study since many important political decisions are being taken on the local level. Cities and towns are increasingly becoming global players, such as when it comes to transport policies and fighting global warming. As Khanna (2016) points out, the fastest growing types of cities in the world today have populations with around one million inhabitants. Barber (2013) shows that over half of the world's population now lives in cities, and argues that mayors should have increasingly more of a say in how the world is run.

At the same time, those who should be holding increasingly powerful local authorities to account are struggling. The decline of local and regional media is apparent in most western countries (Nielsen 2015). For example, in Sweden, the number of local and regional newspaper offices has fallen by 47% since 2004 (Nygren et al. 2018). Much of the recent academic work on local journalism has focused on cities and been defined in terms of 'local news ecologies'. This research perspective emphasises the examination of news and information environments as an interconnected system in a narrowly defined geographical area. In these studies, the flow of news between newspapers and digital platforms is often explored (e.g. Anderson 2009, cf. Nygren et al. 2018).

A limitation in much of this recent work is similar to the limitations I outlined in the thesis in relation to the scholarship concerning media systems and small states. It is often focused on the *structure* of the media environment, concerning

funding, ownership, and the actual news content produced in relation to this. This can lead to less focus on the more *socio-cultural* aspects related to smallness and proximity. These aspects can draw attention to how close relationships between people can influence political news content and dissemination. Nygren et al. (2018) raise the question, in relation to under-researched areas of local news ecologies: 'What are the consequences for the need for critical distance in local coverage in relation to the need to be close to the local society?' (p. 46-47). As outlined in the previous chapter, the scaled down political communication dimensions highlight aspects that are specifically concerned with socio-cultural factors. I showed that these dimensions can impact political dissemination in relation to the size variable, and they therefore are an important area of study alongside the more structural aspects, which have received more attention in the existing literature.

Despite the argument that the small state dimensions can be expanded to communities on the sub-state level in larger states, it is important to stress that we must be careful not to simply see small states as being the same as small societies. There are, of course, substantial differences. As Ott (2000) argues, one of the key differences concerns mobility. The increased opportunity of mobility within larger states can prevent the formation of the same sort of intensely close socio-cultural environment as in smaller states. This close environment can deepen even further through a shared language and national history. Also, politics on the national level in small states concern issues focused on the entire country, in many different policy areas that are outside the realm of local politics, and often receive much more attention in the media. In addition, citizens in local communities in large states are often far away from these national media and political power centres. It is therefore difficult to see national level political reporting in small states as fully comparable to local and municipal settings.

Simply put, small states are states at the end of the day; they are not localities. As discussed earlier, it is common for existing research from large and medium sized western democracies to be seen to be universally applicable. We must be careful

not to try and make the small states simply 'fit' into these states through the frameworks from local communities we might already be familiar with.

Even though there are various differences between small states and communities, I encountered various similarities between my findings and existing research from the local level in larger states, as shown in previous chapters. This was the case, for example, in relation to the two-way online interactions between politicians and citizens (Larsson & Skogerbø 2018). I therefore argue that it is potentially useful to engage with the literature on the local settings, whilst at the same time, being aware of the important limitations. Studies of small states *might* tell us some important things that can be applicable to under-studied socio-cultural political communication dynamics on the local level in large states.

Larger states: National level

I propose, moreover, that the Icelandic case might be useful in helping us to understand what is taking place on the *national* level in larger democracies, in relation to political communication. Iceland can potentially be viewed as a 'canary in the coalmine' in that it presents particular 'warning signs' to larger states concerning media, politics and democracy. This can be related to the *resource issue.* As highlighted in relation to the 'continuum of size' argument, small states are constrained when it comes to resources. With regard to the focus of the research presented in this thesis, this is seen to impact political dissemination in Iceland. But what might be happening to the larger democracies, where media outlets are increasingly struggling in terms of resources? How does this impact political dissemination in these countries?

As shown in the thesis, the legacy media is perceived to be breaking down in most western countries. News media outlets are increasingly struggling to fulfil their democratic roles because of several factors, including the collapse of funding models, increased commercialisation, and the digitisation of news. It is argued that this has led to more superficial sound bite coverage at the expense of critical and in-depth political reporting that aims to hold power to account and

disseminate important political information. My research indicates that the situation is perceived to be worse in Iceland than elsewhere. This was frequently linked to the 'toxic mix' of a heavily commercialised media market and the smallness of it. This mix results in less and less resources available. The market was vulnerable to begin with because of its smallness, and so it is further along in the breakdown *development* the larger states are facing as well.

If researchers want to get a sense of what the political coverage of legacy news outlets in the larger states might look like overall in the coming years, it could be fruitful to examine the situation in Iceland more closely. Small states like Iceland can be seen as 'social laboratories' because of the swifter changes that can take place there. In this case, developments concerning commercialisation become exaggerated due to the smallness of the market. So, are the larger states slowly becoming more similar to Iceland when it comes to its legacy media, due to increased resource constraints? And what does this mean for the democratic roles of the media in these states?

In relation to this, my research illustrated that in order to comprehend the superficial coverage in the legacy news media, there is also a need to understand that Icelandic journalists and politicians mostly work as mobile generalists. As my interviews illustrated, journalism in Iceland is not really perceived as a profession, but rather as a stepping stone towards another career in the future. Since there is not much room for specialised in-depth reporting, and most journalism products are aimed at the same group of people, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that the emphasis has been on the importance of wide and general knowledge rather than deep and specialised understanding.

Most journalists said that their working conditions keep getting worse and this leads to less quality journalism. Journalism in Iceland is a low-pay, high-stress job. The tough working demands often mean less time to prepare and a majority of journalists admitted that they have conducted interviews without sufficient preparation and that there is usually not enough time to fact-check material. Those working in the privately funded media appear to be under even more

pressure than those working at public broadcaster *RÚV*. However, the journalists working at *RÚV* also cited increasing resource constraints and difficult working conditions following the financial crisis. In sum, the working conditions have never been particularly good, but they keep getting worse, which has resulted in increasingly mobile journalists, who are mainly generalists, attempting to cover politics. Again, *resource constraints* are perceived to be an underlying problem.

Findings that can be related to these themes have emerged in the wider political communication literature in the larger states. For example, it has been comparatively highlighted that journalism is, to an extent, becoming just a stepping stone in a longer career. Fluidity is now beginning to increasingly characterise journalism in many countries (Josephi & Oller Alonso 2018), and political journalists are increasingly concerned about their distinctive position because of desk mergers. Fewer and fewer journalists can now specialise in political coverage than before (Väliverronen 2018). Deuze and Witschge (2018) illustrate that long-term planning in journalism, as well as "moving up the ladder' have been replaced by job-hopping and a portfolio work life as news professionals increasingly have contracts, not careers in journalism' (pp. 170-171). They argue that in the contemporary precarious setting, where newsrooms are increasingly made up of loosely affiliated competitors and colleagues, there is a need to expand the focus of journalism studies in order to understand what journalism is becoming, and what it is like to work as a journalist. And, it is not just the journalists that are seen to be becoming mobile generalists, similar to the Icelandic case. For example, as Davis (2018) highlights in his research on elites in the United Kingdom, politicians are increasingly mobile and flexible. They are no longer specialists and can instead 'move organisation or sector, from public to private and back again' (p. 132).

As shown in my research, journalists and politicians in Iceland can, to a significant extent, be defined as mobile generalists. This impacts possibilities for in-depth critical political coverage, as well as in-depth politics. So, has Iceland been experiencing phenomena that the larger states are increasingly starting to face? Are the larger states becoming more similar to the small state of Iceland when it

comes to journalism and politics, as some recent studies appear to imply? If this is the case, then the findings in this thesis are relevant for the wider discipline and they contribute to the expansion of the focus of study on the national level more generally. Put simply, if we want to see where journalism is heading, Iceland might provide us with some useful clues. The same goes for the political sphere.

Which leads me to the internet. With a legacy media breaking down, the internet provided a possible new avenue to fulfil the democratic public sphere role of the media. As I illustrated, much of the early literature on the internet was highly positive when it came to its democratic potential and this was frequently contrasted to the older top-down legacy news media. Of particular relevance here were the arguments that the internet would engender open and public democratic *participation* through online channels and that it could increase the public's *access* to democratic representatives.

This optimist argument has been heavily criticised by more pessimist views, as well as through empirical research. It has, for example, been argued that it is impossible to examine the internet outside of power structures within societies. Many people do not have access to the internet and mainly educated and well-off groups in society engage with political issues online. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, it has been shown that politicians mostly communicate in one-way 'broadcast style' online and that little interaction takes place between elected officials and the public. The distance and lack of engagement that exists between politicians and the public offline is also apparent online.

In contrast to the existing literature that highlights pre-existing socio-economic structures inhibiting the internet's democratic potential, it can be argued that Iceland is an ideal counter case. It could be used to illustrate if the internet can in fact enhance democracy and contribute to the creation of a digital public sphere. As shown, access to the internet is universal, equality is high, the population is highly educated, and the smallness of the society results in much less fragmentation than present in the larger societies. Moreover, party membership and voter turnout are high compared to other countries. This is relevant since

political activities have shown to have an influence on political activities online. Put simply, those who are engaged politically offline are more likely to be engaged online.

So what does the Icelandic case potentially tell us about the larger states as regards online political participation and interactions? My research showed that in an ideal setting to counter the more pessimist perspectives, the results concerning political activity are somewhat mixed. According to the survey administered for this thesis, only a small minority of the public, or 5%, actively participates in *public* political debates online in Iceland. This is in spite of 48% of respondents being 'very much' or 'fairly much' interested in politics. My research appears to back up findings from other studies that show that political interest is linked to political engagement online. There were, however, not clear patterns concerning demographic variables such as education and income.

The findings do reveal that more people in Iceland have interacted with politicians than engaged in political debates, but this is still a small portion of the overall population. It can be argued that even an ideal setting for a digital mediated public sphere like Iceland does not result in much political participation from the public. If the legacy media is becoming weaker and is perceived to be failing in its political coverage, and online platforms only engage a small portion of the population (even in a country where this is not a question of access, class, education or distance), then what does this suggest? What does this mean for political dissemination and people's opportunity to stay informed about politics and to participate in debates? This is, after all, important if we want to hold those in power to account.

The Icelandic case appears to suggest that a highly equal and digitally connected population does not necessarily lead to much participation and engagement in *public*. What it does suggest is that we need to move the research into the more private domains on social media. My research showed that much of the two-way interactions take place on there, as opposed to the more public settings. So, does the Icelandic case potentially shut down the idea of the internet and social media

serving as realistic forums for a political *public* sphere to exist? Does it confirm the more pessimist perspective? It at least appears to be the case that in the current climate, people are not participating as much in these debates in public as they are in private. In public, the politicians appear to be bypassing the weak legacy media and overworked and inexperienced journalists who lack specialisation in politics. Politicians can communicate their message online directly to the public, and this material is routinely disseminated in legacy news stories, often completely or mostly unfiltered.

One of the central democratic roles of the media is to stage open and *public* debates in order to hold those in power to account. If the media cannot do this adequately, and these debates do not take place publicly online either, then where are they supposed to take place? This is a question not just for Iceland, but for all states with a struggling legacy media and an ever-expanding online political communication ecology.

Avenues for further research

I argued earlier that we add an important dimension to understanding the crisis of democracy and political communication in the world today by including small states in future research. If democracy really is at a crossroads, then we need to examine it in a range of settings. And by including small states we understand more clearly the effects that size can have. In addition to understanding the effects of size, I also argued that if we ignore the world's smallest states we are missing out on understanding what they can potentially tell us that studying the larger states cannot.

As highlighted in this chapter, the Icelandic case potentially helps us to understand future developments concerning the legacy media, journalism and politics, in small as well as larger states. Moreover, the small state of Iceland provides an ideal setting to test the optimistic scenario concerning the public sphere democracy enhancement opportunities of the internet. This would have been missed if the state had continued to be overlooked in political communication research.

Future research could explore these areas in more detail. A key finding of the thesis shows how one company, Facebook, is increasingly mediating much of the political dissemination in Iceland. The weakness of the legacy media, in addition to closer proximity between elites and the public, leads to more informal engagement online, particularly in the semi-private and private settings. Political decisions are being debated there, interviews are being conducted, political information is being shared and so forth. The role this company plays in political communication dissemination in a state with 93% of inhabitants using it requires more study. Is this another potential 'warning sign' for larger states? Will increasing internet penetration rates and a weaker media lead to more of these sorts of 'two-level' interactions in general? What does this mean for democracy and political information?

As mentioned in the thesis, a government bill concerning state subsidies for private media outlets in Iceland is currently being debated in the Icelandic parliament. If it passes, the Icelandic media market will become similar to the ones in the Nordic countries. Since all of my research was gathered before this happened, this presents an interesting opportunity for comparative research in the near future. Will these subsidies improve the political coverage? Will they help to make the legacy media outlets stronger and less focused on superficial soundbite coverage? Or are they simply insufficient bandages on a funding model that is too broken to fix? As the thesis showed, Iceland is the 'odd one out' of the five Nordic countries concerning state subsidies for private media outlets, so it will be interesting to see if this will lead to some changes in how its media system compares to the other four countries.

This leads me to *RÚV*. As shown in the thesis, it enjoys far more trust than the private outlets in Iceland. I was therefore quite surprised when conducting the interviews. Although many interviewees did say that it does a somewhat better job than the private outlets, people still perceived it to mostly produce superficial and problematic political material on the average news day. But this did make sense when understood in context of how its newsroom has shrunk in recent years. It was downsized following the financial crisis and has not been restored

to its pre-crisis level with regard to human and financial resources. Many interviewees expressed their view that in an era of broken funding models and misinformation and disinformation online, they perceive *RÚV* to be more important than ever. Based on my findings, one could make the argument that a strong public service outlet is even more essential in a small and weak media market than in larger states. This could be explored further in the future in comparison to other small and large states.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, if we probe the more informal settings of political communication we need to engage with people in order to understand how they are using these channels, and what their perceptions are. If I had not conducted interviews and probed the public's interactions, and instead examined the publicly available data available on social media and in the news media, I would have missed these more informal means of political communication. My research was focused on understanding to what extent the media can perform its ideal democratic roles of holding those in power to account, staging open and plural debates, and representing people to authority. In order to understand how informed people in representative democracies are, we need talk to them and gauge their perceptions as regards the media and its democratic functions.

This is, however, not to say that this more public material is not important. As I showed, the limited content analysis that has been conducted on Icelandic news coverage appears to echo findings from other states. I suggest that future studies could examine legacy media content, as well as social media content, and compare it to the perceptions discussed here. Future analysis could for example explore in more detail to what extent social media is used as a single source for political news reports in the Icelandic legacy media, in comparison to media outlets in other countries.

Much has been written about political developments in Iceland following the financial crisis as shown earlier. A vast amount of this coverage has been based on the atypical events, such as 'the pots and pans' revolution and protests quickly organised on Facebook in relation to the release of the Panama Papers, which led

to the subsequent resignation of the prime minister. This took place directly after he had to answer very tough questions in an interview broadcast on the current affairs show 'Kastljós' on *RÚV*. Following these cases, one could be forgiven for thinking that the Icelandic media is tough on politicians, and that the Icelandic public has been heavily involved in politics, both offline and online.

What this thesis has shown is that by focusing on the more routine periods, a somewhat more nuanced picture emerges. Political coverage is, overall, seen to be superficial and often lacking in informed criticism, and only a small minority of the population engages with politics 'out in the open' on the average day. What does this potentially tell us about politics in general in Iceland? As highlighted earlier, people distrust politicians, the media and most institutions. This needs to be factored into the equation in future studies alongside the research presented here. The real story that has emerged in this thesis is one of blurred boundaries and the central importance of informal channels of communication in the political dynamics of a small island state of 360,000 people in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean.

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Appendix 1: Basic interview frame for Icelandic journalists and politicians

These are the basic/standard questions. Answers were probed and interviewees asked to give examples related to their own experiences.

Questions about themselves
1) Why did you decide to become a journalist/Why did you decide to run for parliament?
2) Do you see this as being your main job/career?
3) Would you describe yourself more as a specialist or a generalist? Why? What about other journalists/politicians?

Media coverage/financial crisis/journalist-politician relations
4) How does the Icelandic media cover politics?
5) Did the financial crisis have any impact on how politics is portrayed in the media?
6) For politicians: How often do you speak to journalists? Describe your relationship.
   For journalists: How often do you talk to politicians? Describe your relationship.
7) Who do you think is more dominant in the relationship between politicians and journalists in Iceland?
8) How do politicians behave when they are in the media talking about politics?

Social media
9) Has social media had any impact on political coverage in the media?
10) How do Icelandic politicians use social media?
11) Describe your own social media usage.
12) Are you friends with politicians/journalists on Facebook?
13) Do you interact with politicians/journalists/the public on Facebook? Comments, private messages, likes etc.

Smallness/media market/politics
14) Does Iceland's small size have any impact on political coverage in the media?
15) Does the smallness have any impact on the relationship between journalists and politicians?
16) How would you describe the Icelandic media market?
17) How would you describe Icelandic politics?
18) Ask about if they have friends/family on the 'other' side.
19) Anything you want to add?

Appendix 2: List of interviewees

1. Broadcast journalist – 2 November 2016
2. Broadcast journalist – 4 November 2016
3. Broadcast journalist - 7 November 2016
4. Broadcast journalist – 10 November 2016
5. Online journalist – 30 November 2016
6. Broadcast journalist – 7 December 2016
7. Broadcast journalist – 16 December 2016
8. Print journalist – 13 January 2017
9. Print journalist – 17 January 2017
10. Print journalist – 23 January 2017
11. Opposition MP – 3 February 2017
12. Opposition MP – 16 February 2017
13. Government MP – 20 February 2017
14. Opposition MP – 22 February 2017
15. Opposition MP – 23 February 2017
16. Government MP – 1 March 2017
17. Opposition MP – 16 March 2017
18. Government MP – 17 March 2017
19. Government minister/MP – 3 May 2017
20. Government minister/MP – 11 May 2017
21. Government minister/MP – 17 May 2017
22. Broadcast journalist – 2 June 2017
23. Government MP – 15 June 2017
24. Opposition MP – 16 June 2017
25. Government minister/MP – 19 June 2017
26. Opposition MP – 21 June 2017
27. Opposition MP – 22 June 2017
28. Opposition MP – 29 June 2017
29. Opposition MP – 30 June 2017
30. Opposition MP – 8 August 2017
31. Online journalist – 9 August 2017
32. Print journalist – 14 August 2017
33. Online journalist – 14 August 2017
34. Government minister/MP – 22 August 2017
35. Broadcast journalist – 28 August 2017
36. Print journalist – 28 August 2017
37. Opposition MP – 29 August 2017
38. Opposition MP – 30 August 2017
39. Print journalist – 31 August 2017
40. Government MP – 31 August 2017
41. Broadcast journalist – 5 September 2017
42. Broadcast journalist – 6 September 2017
43. Government MP – 7 September 2017
44. Broadcast journalist – 12 September 2017
45. Broadcast journalist – 13 September 2017
46. Broadcast journalist – 14 September 2017
47. Print journalist – 15 September 2017
48. Broadcast journalist – 19 September 2017
49. Online journalist – 20 September 2017
50. Opposition MP – 21 September 2017

Appendix 3: Questionnaire for survey[69]

1) How interested or disinterested are you in politics?

Very interested
Fairly interested
Neither interested nor disinterested
Fairly disinterested
Very disinterested

2) How much or how little do you follow the Icelandic media's coverage of Icelandic politics?

Very much
Fairly much
Neither much nor little
Fairly little
Very little

3) How well or how badly do you think the Icelandic media in general is doing in its coverage of politics in Iceland?

Very well
Fairly well
Neither well nor badly
Fairly badly
Very badly

4) How much or how little do you trust the political coverage in the Icelandic media in general?

Very much
Fairly much
Neither much nor little
Fairly little
Very little

5) How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Answers in a matrix/grid. Five options:

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree

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[69] Following a short introduction, respondents were given the option of skipping questions if they did not want to answer. Journalists were defined as those currently working at one of the news media outlets in Iceland. Politicians were defined as current members of parliaments. Not every single question from the survey is discussed in the thesis. All relevant answers in relation to the arguments presented are in chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Strongly disagree

Political coverage in the Icelandic media is generally superficial

The Icelandic media generally asks questions that are critical enough in its coverage of politics in Iceland

The Icelandic media generally conducts enough investigative work when it covers politics in Iceland

The Icelandic media generally has enough financial resources to be able to produce quality political coverage

Political coverage in the Icelandic media is generally negative

The Icelandic media generally provides citizens with reliable information to judge politicians' work

There are in general too few journalists working in the Icelandic media and this leads to less quality in the political coverage

Political coverage in the Icelandic media generally gives an accurate picture of politicians' work in the Icelandic parliament

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6) How much or how little do you notice debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media (for example Facebook and Twitter)?

Very much
Fairly much
Neither much nor little
Fairly little
Very little

7) How much or how little do you participate in debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media (for example by writing comments or sharing political news reports)?

Very much
Fairly much
Neither much nor little
Fairly little
Very little

8) Thinking about the discussions and news you see on social media about politics, which comes closest to your view?

I like seeing lots of political discussions and news on social media
I am worn-out by how many political discussions and news I see on social media

I don't feel strongly about these posts one way or the other

9) Some think that social media has contributed to people being more informed about politics in Iceland than before. Others think that social media has contributed to people being less informed about politics than before. On the whole, do you think that social media has contributed to people being more or less informed about politics in Iceland than before?

Much more informed
More informed
Neither more nor less informed
Less informed
Much less informed

10) Some think that social media has contributed to constructive debates concerning politics in Iceland and encouraged discussions between people with differing views. Others think that social media has contributed to debates that are unconstructive and encouraged people to mainly have discussions with others who share similar views. Do you think that social media has in general contributed to constructive or unconstructive debates about politics in Iceland?

Social media has very much contributed to constructive debates
Social media has somewhat contributed to constructive debates
Social media has neither contributed to constructive nor unconstructive debates
Social media has somewhat contributed to unconstructive debates
Social media has very much contributed to unconstructive debates
Social media has not had any impact on the debates

11) Have you <u>liked</u> and/or do you <u>follow</u> any of the below options on Facebook? (Please note that this does not mean being a 'friend'). Please mark all relevant answers. I have liked or follow…

An Icelandic news outlet
An Icelandic journalist
An Icelandic political party
An Icelandic politician
A group fighting for a particular cause
I am not on Facebook
Nothing of the above

12) Do you follow Icelandic politicians, political parties or journalists on any other social media apart from Facebook? Please mark all relevant answers.
(Possibilities in a matrix with answers: Twitter, Snapchat and Instagram)

<u>Questions 13-15 not displayed for those who answered 'I am not on Facebook' in question 11.</u>

13) Are you 'friends' with any Icelandic politicians on Facebook? (Here politician refers to current MPs and government ministers)

No I don't have any friends on Facebook who are politicians
Yes I have 1 friend on Facebook who is a politician
Yes I have 2-5 friends on Facebook who are politicians
Yes I have 6-15 friends on Facebook who are politicians
Yes I have over 15 friends on Facebook who are politicians

14) Are you 'friends' with any Icelandic journalists on Facebook? (Here journalist refers to current journalists in print media, radio, television or online news outlets)

No I don't have any friends on Facebook who are journalists
Yes I have 1 friend on Facebook who is a journalist
Yes I have 2-5 friends on Facebook who are journalists
Yes I have 6-15 friends on Facebook who are journalists
Yes I have over 15 friends on Facebook who are journalists

15) Have you in the past twelve months done any of the following on Facebook? Please mark all relevant answers.

I have sent a private message to a politician
I have sent a private message to a journalist
I have commented on a politician's status update
I have commented on a journalist's status update
I have liked a politician's status update
I have liked a journalist's status update
None of the above

16) Some think that the smallness of the Icelandic society has a positive effect on political coverage. There are short chains of command and it is therefore easy to get access to information and interviews. Others think that the smallness has a negative effect on the coverage. Close and often personal connections mean that it is difficult for the media to report on politics in Iceland in a critical manner. On the whole, do you think the smallness in general has a positive or negative effect on political coverage in Iceland?

The smallness has a much more positive than negative effect
The smallness has a somewhat more positive than negative effect
The smallness neither has a more positive than negative effect
The smallness has a somewhat more negative than positive effect
The smallness has a much more negative than positive effect

17) It can be said that politicians and journalists need each other. Journalists need information from politicians and politicians need journalists to get coverage on the issues they are working on. Who do you think in general is more dominant in this relationship in Iceland, politicians or journalists?

Politicians are very much dominant
Politicians are somewhat more dominant
Politicians and journalists are equally dominant
Journalists are somewhat more dominant
Journalists are very much dominant

18) Please mark all that applies to you. (Here you are also asked about 'local politicians'. 'Politician' here refers to current MPs and government ministers)

I am closely related to one or more politician
I am closely related to one or more local politician
I am closely related to one or more journalist
I have one or more friend who is a politician
I have one or more friend who is a local politician
I have one or more friend who is a journalist
I have one or more acquaintance who is a politician
I have one or more acquaintance who is a local politician
I have one or more acquaintance who is a journalist
Nothing of the above applies to me

19) Have you ever in the past three years got in contact with a politician (MP or government minister), local politician and/or a journalist because of a particular issue you wanted to discuss that was related to his or her job? Please mark all relevant answers.
(Answer options in a matrix: Once or more than once for each group)

20) In your opinion, how much or how little influence does the general public have on the decisions made by politicians in Iceland?

Very much influence
Fairly much influence
Neither much nor little influence
Fairly little influence
Very little influence

21) In your opinion, how much or how little influence does the general public have on the political coverage in the Icelandic media?

Very much influence
Fairly much influence
Neither much nor little influence
Fairly little influence
Very little influence

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22) How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Answers in a matrix/grid. Five options:

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree

The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been of higher quality following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis

The Icelandic media is owned by too few individuals

Icelandic politicians possess general superficial knowledge in many areas rather than specialist knowledge in fewer fields

The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been more ruthless following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis

Because Iceland is a rather homogenous nation there is in general less critical reporting in the political coverage in Iceland than in more heterogeneous societies

The Icelandic media is in general independent enough, in the sense that outside groups and individuals don't have significant influence on its coverage

There are in general too close personal connections between politicians and journalists in Iceland

There is too much connection between certain media outlets and certain special interest groups in Iceland

Icelandic journalists possess general superficial knowledge in many areas rather than specialist knowledge in fewer fields

There is too much connection between certain media outlets and certain political parties in Iceland

The Icelandic media's coverage of politics in Iceland has in general been more critical following the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath than it was before the crisis

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23) Which of the following media outlets, if any, you think is too connected to a particular political party? Which party is it too connected too?
(Set up in a matrix so respondents could drag relevant parties and outlets together)

Media outlets
Bylgjan
Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV)
Stöð 2
DV
Fréttablaðið
Morgunblaðið
Viðskiptablaðið
Stundin

Mbl.is
Vísir.is
Kjarninn

Political parties
Björt framtíð
Framsókn
Píratar
Samfylkingin
Sjálfstæðisflokkur
Viðreisn
Vinstri Græn

24) Which media outlet do you trust the most to cover politics in Iceland today?
(Respondents were asked to drag into two columns. One for trust and one for distrust.)

Bylgjan
Ríkisútvarpið (RÚV)
Stöð 2
DV
Fréttablaðið
Morgunblaðið
Viðskiptablaðið
Stundin
Mbl.is
Vísir.is
Kjarninn

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25) How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements:
Answers in a matrix/grid. Five options:

Strongly agree
Somewhat agree
Neither agree nor disagree
Somewhat disagree
Strongly disagree

Icelandic politicians sometimes make decisions and behave in a particular way solely to get themselves noticed by the media

The Icelandic media increasingly focuses on the private lives of Icelandic politicians

Icelandic journalists increasingly report on complex issues and debates related to Icelandic politics

The Icelandic media increasingly cover politics as a competition between politicians and political parties at the expense of a substantive debate

The Icelandic media increasingly portrays Icelandic politics as entertainment rather than real news

Appendix 4: Breakdown of answers focused on social media

Breakdown of answers from chapter 7 found to have significant differences between groups determined by a chi-square test (*$p < 0,05$; **$p < 0,01$; ***$p < 0,001$). Percentages are rounded so they do not always add exactly to 100.

How much or how little do you notice debates concerning politics on social media (for example Facebook and Twitter)?

	Very much	Fairly much	Neither much nor little	Fairly little	Very little
Gender *					
Men	9%	32%	20%	15%	24%
Women	8%	30%	21%	21%	20%
Age *					
18-29	17%	44%	16%	8%	15%
30-44	9%	36%	25%	19%	12%
45-59	6%	26%	22%	22%	24%
60 and older	6%	21%	16%	22%	35%
Education *					
Without university education	7%	30%	20%	19%	24%
With university education	13%	36%	19%	16%	16%
Household income*					
300.000 ISK or less	29%	54%	5%	2%	10%
301.000-500.000 ISK	7%	27%	17%	23%	27%
501.000-700.000 ISK	7%	24%	22%	17%	30%
701.000-900.000 ISK	6%	49%	19%	13%	13%
Higher than 900.000 ISK	9%	32%	22%	20%	17%
Political interest *					
Very interested	39%	25%	11%	15%	64%
Fairly interested	8%	41%	20%	18%	49%
Neither interested nor disinterested	3%	28%	28%	19%	31%
Fairly disinterested	3%	28%	15%	26%	31%
Very disinterested	1%	12%	18%	50%	13%

How much or how little do you participate in debates concerning Icelandic politics on social media (for example by writing comments or sharing political news reports)?

	Very much	Fairly much	Neither much nor little	Fairly little	Very little
Gender *					
Men	3%	5%	13%	20%	59%
Women	1%	2%	8%	19%	71%
Political interest *					
Very interested	13%	10%	13%	24%	41%
Fairly interested	0%	5%	15%	23%	58%
Neither interested nor disinterested	0%	2%	8%	16%	74%
Fairly disinterested	0%	1%	4%	17%	79%
Very disinterested	1%	0%	10%	13%	77%

Thinking about the discussions and news you see on social media about politics, which comes closest to your view?

	I like seeing lots of political discussions and news on social media	I am worn-out by how many political discussions and news I see on social media	I don't feel strongly about these posts one way or the other
Left/right spectrum*			
0-2 Very left wing	42%	8%	49%
3-4 Fairly left wing	35%	15%	50%
5 Centre	26%	25%	49%
6-7 Fairly right wing	34%	23%	43%
8-10 Very right wing	31%	19%	51%
Age *			
18-29	28%	15%	57%
30-44	30%	20%	51%
45-59	29%	21%	50%
60 and older	42%	19%	39%
Education *			
Without university education	29%	19%	53%
With university education	41%	20%	39%
Constituencies*			
Reykjavík North	38%	14%	47%
Reykjavík South	40%	14%	46%
Northwest	24%	23%	53%
Northeast	21%	23%	56%
South	30%	13%	57%
Southwest	33%	25%	43%
Political interest *			
Very interested	70%	9%	20%
Fairly interested	47%	12%	41%
Neither interested nor disinterested	18%	24%	59%
Fairly disinterested	9%	33%	58%
Very disinterested	0%	23%	77%

Some think that social media has contributed to people being more informed about politics in Iceland than before. Others think that social media has contributed to people being less informed about politics than before. On the whole, do you think that social media has contributed to people being more or less informed about politics in Iceland than before?

	Much more informed	More informed	Neither more nor less informed	Less informed	Much less informed
Age *					
18-29	11%	48%	30%	9%	3%
30-44	10%	43%	36%	8%	2%
45-59	9%	34%	44%	11%	3%
60 and older	10%	39%	33%	15%	3%
Gender *					
Men	9%	39%	38%	11%	3%
Women	11%	43%	35%	10%	2%
Political interest ***					
Very interested	18%	34%	30%	15%	3%
Fairly interested	10%	40%	33%	13%	4%
Neither interested nor disinterested	8%	43%	39%	8%	2%
Fairly disinterested	5%	42%	42%	10%	1%
Very disinterested	10%	41%	38%	5%	5%

Some think that social media has contributed to constructive debates concerning politics in Iceland and encouraged discussions between people with differing views. Others think that social media has contributed to debates that are unconstructive and encouraged people to mainly have discussions with others who share similar views. Do you think that social media has in general contributed to constructive or unconstructive debates about politics in Iceland?

	Very much contributed to constructive debates	Somewhat contributed to constructive debates	Neither contributed to constructive nor unconstructive debates	Somewhat contributed to unconstructive debates	Very much contributed to unconstructive debates	Has not had any impact on the debates
Left/right spectrum***						
0-2 Very left wing	16%	32%	17%	25%	8%	2%
3-4 Fairly left wing	2%	28%	29%	31%	8%	2%
5 Centre	5%	29%	33%	20%	8%	4%
6-7 Fairly right wing	4%	21%	26%	33%	16%	0%
8-10 Very right wing	8%	20%	24%	29%	17%	2%
Gender *						
Men	5%	25%	25%	28%	15%	1%
Women	7%	26%	30%	26%	8%	3%
Political interest ***						
Very interested	15%	22%	20%	26%	18%	0%
Fairly interested	6%	22%	25%	33%	14%	0%
Neither interested nor disinterested	4%	28%	36%	24%	6%	1%
Fairly disinterested	4%	32%	23%	26%	9%	7%
Very disinterested	2%	32%	31%	17%	9%	9%