

Chapter 34 : Rise & fall of court journalism

*Truth is a weapon,
use it with discretion.*
Postmodern rhetorics

A distinction must be made between the use of the press by the royal house as a means of gaining influence & the press as a defence of the position of the royal house. The press as a means of gaining influence has always existed. The press as a defence of the royal house's position began in Sweden in 1912 with a series of articles in Aftonbladet about the royalty's home life¹ & has since continued. The intention has been to arouse sympathy. Most remembered are the photographs, films & features about Carl Gustaf, the Fridhem & the Haga princesses. Bagehot's "mystique" pertains to the office, not the royal's personal life. The more intimate information is published, the better. This form of personal journalism - interviews & home visits of the rich & famous, not only of royalty - is called court journalism. There are four definitions:

- A court journalist does usually not work with political or economic journalism, but with cultural journalism and news coverage of the royal house.
- A court journalist stands out for fawning, uncritical admiration of the royal house, intellectual laziness and non-existent source criticism.
- A court journalist chases scandals and invents them if they do not exist - a kind of mental stalking.
- A special genre is TT's news bulletins about the national tours etc. Long detailed features were published throughout Gustaf VI's reign. No detail was too insignificant to include. Nowadays such features are found almost exclusively in Japanese & Thai newspapers.

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There is a court journalism before and after 1962 - the year when the court's CIO Sten Egnell was employed. That year, the first live interview with a royal about his/her love life (Prince Bertil's 50th birthday) was published and Vecko Journalen soon thereafter published its extensive commentary about Swedish court journalists. The 1962 boom lasted until the wedding in 1976 when it petered out because the royal house and everyone in its vicinity refused interviews. The next boom began with Crown Princess Victoria's confirmation in 1995 (the same year that the Royal Court's information and press unit was formed) and ended with her & Princess Madeleine's wedding in 2010/13. If you go further back in time there are also clear peaks linked to the monarchy's defeat in 1865, 1905 & 1918.

The 1962 practitioners distinguished between news coverage & "royal poncey". Margit Fjellman: "What is royal poncey? One could say with a certain simplification that the poncey begins where the legitimate - and highly valued - royal news ends. The high objects are described in a submissive style, wrapped in a cloud of long worn-out clichés and supported by outdated values from the golden days of patriotism. The most insignificant circumstances are presented as extremely strange, perhaps even symbolic of the nature or manner of the high object. Sometimes, this kind of article says something very true, namely that the royals are

¹ Jaya 1913.

people like the rest of us, but it is said in a way that suggests a fitting astonishment, yes, dismay in the author. The poncey is a product of [intellectual] idleness.”²

Probably Fjellman thought of the writings in conjunction with Gustaf V's 85th birthday - a relapse into old habits. The "Royal poncey", a legacy from Oscar II, under King Gustaf V gradually disappeared. Vecko Journal writers from the later interwar period as Sven "Finn" Haglund and Margit "Tigram" Siwertz normally formulated themselves quite straight. Much like the royals themselves in their memoirs from this this time. In fact, 47 percent of the population was in favour of the press.³ There was an ongoing process of growing "intimacy". The best postwar features were like confidential conversations. A kind of counterpart to Lennart Nilsson's intimate and flattering images. A royal house of people, not monuments. This was perceived as partly an effect of the Republican debate: the humility and servility was gone but the respect was still there. I exemplify with a kind of personal, but at the same time respectful portrait which no longer exists:

"He is very Swedish, or you might rather say Germanic to his type. It has been said of his eyes that they are seraphim-blue and it is quite right that they have just the nuance of the Seraphim order band. He is known to have the attributes of Princess Sibylla and perhaps even more of her dead beloved brother Prince Hubertus, who fell as an aviator during World War II. But Prince Gustaf Adolf's friends would like to emphasize that he also has a tangible resemblance to his father. Like him, he carries himself extremely well. He is well-trained from toes to fingertips and has a posture that you even in our democratic time dare call royal.”⁴

"I remember one of the first times I saw the king in reality. It was in the early 1980s. At that time, there was a hotspot restaurant called Eriks, run by the king's friend Erik Lallerstedt. This boat or barge was moored at Strandvägen. I sat there and had dinner when the king and a bunch of male friends entered. It was Noppe, Aje and all kinds of people. Suddenly these guys wanted to drink completely ordinary man of the street drinks so they sat and ordered rum and cola, cognac and soda and scotch and zingo and thought it was really fun to see them do this. It was a little special because the king came in such good shape that he started singing his orders and everyone in the company in the restaurant could not fail to hear his "Guys do you want something to drink..." I remember that I thought it was quite nice and fun that he who was then a young king could behave like a normal man when being with his friends.”⁵

In the introduction, it is commented on that the personal journalism's most important contribution was to strengthen the monarchy by creating empathy for the members of the royal house: "They're like us, maybe not exactly, but in spirit."

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The confirmation year 1962 Carl Gustaf had a solid bad reputation as an interviewee. Basically, he said nothing, was barely audible, mumbled bland phrases and looked uncomfortable. What was written was based on interviews with his school environment: the principal, teachers, schoolmates and others. He has since explained that it was easier to blend

² Kristina Michanek & Bengt Michanek Kunglighetens pennskaft. Vecko-Journalen, 1962:15. [Intervju med Margit Fjellman.]

³ Stig Nordfeldt. Vill vi ha republik? Vecko-Journalen, 1962:19/20, ss. 20-21. [Sifo.]

⁴ Margit Fjellman. Sådan är kronprinsen, del 2. Hemmets veckotidning, 1969:49.

⁵ Karin Lennmor. Mitt starkaste minne av kungen. Youtube, juni 2008.

in at Broms & Sigtuna Hum if he did not think about his future role. Journalism - whether positive or negative - accentuated all the conflicting expectations of him, both socially isolating him and creating anxiety. It is difficult to be Crown Prince and citizen at the same time.

In the spring of 1964, Carl Gustaf was interviewed by Vecko Journalen's editor-in-chief Stig Ahlgren. It was the first time he was interviewed "for real". What should have been a normal conversation about his then life degenerated virtually immediately into single combat. Ahlgren tried to get Carl Gustaf off balance while Carl Gustaf stared at him like some kind of low grade trash, beneath contempt but dangerous all the same: He reminded Ahlgren of his father.⁶

Until his 1966 graduation, a number of reports were written that dissected Carl Gustaf's intelligence, character & general skills in an extraordinarily defamatory manner. He was weighed like a piece of sausage and found hollow. During his military service he was not as exposed. There is a report that during the trip with Älvsnabben 38 people were freelancing for Swedish newspapers. There is not so much information. It seems to have been because Carl Gustaf learned to keep a low profile and because the surroundings felt sorry for him. In a democratic spirit, he would be treated like any other naval cadet, even if the journalists waited in every port.

In 1969, after the military service and the Uppsala studies, Carl Gustaf was finally forced to give normal interviews - i.e. sit down on a chair and answer journalists' questions about who he was and what he had for opinions on various issues. His mentor, Stig Ramel, appears to have been the driving force behind it. He was concerned that the lack of information encouraged rumours. Better to take the bull by the horns. Such interviews continued until 1976.⁷

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On October 7, 1971, Egnell managed to get Carl Gustaf and Princess Christina to attend a meeting of the Publicist's Association. The meeting was attended by a record 150 people. It would be nice to be able to quote Carl Gustaf's uncensored opinions about how he was knocked about in the press but the condition for him and Christina attending was no direct quotes. According to later recollections, it went like this:

Carl Gustaf started. He had no objections to the press describing his life, even his nightlife, but they had to get the facts right. He found it hard to comprehend all these errors and fantasies. This was particularly true of the "research" articles based on older newspaper clips. While it was amusing to read how the facts year by year were distorted into something unrecognizable, it did not increase his respect for the profession. "Although there often is a core of truth in what they write, they embellish it with so much false information that the whole article becomes useless. They confuse names and dates and if there's a gap in the story, they make something up."⁸ He was also vexed that out of context information and fictional quotes were published as "interviews".

⁶ Stig Ahlgren. Stig Ahlgren samtalar med kronprinsen. Vecko-Journalen, 1964:17.

⁷ Ortmark, 1969; Ortmark, 2013; Ramel, 1994: ss. 175-181.

⁸ George W Herald. Intervju med kronprinsen. Hemmets veckotidning, 1973:17.

Christina continued “We royals play a role that is not like that of other celebrities. We are aware that we are in great need of publicity - the day you stop writing about the Bernadotte family we no longer mean that much - but it is difficult to know what to say when you get questions such as: How do you live? How big is your bed? What kind of food do you like?” She also felt it unwise to “overexpose” herself. She wanted to wait until she had something to say. Both disapproved of what the journalists had written about their mother. Christina was particularly unsympathetic to all the siblings' love problems being blamed on Sibylla. They were perfectly capable of making a mess themselves.

The discussion afterwards was mainly about the journalists defending their actions on the grounds that these were the conditions of the profession. Carl Gustaf stated that he had stopped caring and mostly laughed at the whole thing. “If I reacted to all the writings about my errors and alleged girls, I would become insane!” One of those present was the judge at the Stockholm court of appeal Gustaf Petrén. He pointed out that the publicity about royalty differs on one essential point from any other publicity: “In the case of other people, most of the publicity surrounding them relates to their special efforts in different fields. Politicians talk about political issues, artists about artistic problems etc. Publicity about the personal comes as a supplement. The royals are largely cut off from speaking on all issues, political issues and social problems at all. The publicity surrounding them is only about their person and way of life, therefore the question of the delimitation in this area becomes important.”⁹

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The main topic Carl Gustaf's love affairs. Details of his first ”amours” were published in Året Runt 1963:19 which sold over 500 thousand copies - the magazine's greatest selling success of all time. Carl Gustaf took great offence. Many of other candidates were presented right up to Fib/Aktuellts 1974 article about Carl Gustaf's ”sex nests”.¹⁰ That article may well be said to be the result of a royal own goal. Instead of informing the reporters about the seriousness of his relations or not, Carl Gustaf amused himself by making the work of gossip journalists more difficult through misleading information. The court denied all relations - even those that demonstrably existed - and therefore lacked any credibility on the subject. Carl Gustaf eventually got a solid bad reputation as a devil dog. The article was the death blow to Carl Gustaf's newly formed ”media council” where Åhlén & Åkerlund's publisher director Sven Broman was included.

There was also a parallel debate in which Carl Gustaf's female acquaintances were allegedly helped out in their career by being seen in his vicinity. They themselves would be too lightweight to succeed on their own. This debate has continued so that, for example, Emma Pernald's employment at the advertising company Storåkers McCann is perceived to be of the same nature as Princess Madeleine's employment at Childhood. A product of their social position rather than of their competence.

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The years following Carl Gustav's wedding, the media landscape changed. The most royal weekly newspapers had been Vecko Journalen, Allers, Hemmets Veckojournal, Hänt i

⁹ Publicistklubbens årsbok 1971-1972.

¹⁰ Hans Bergström. Kungens hemliga kärleksnäten! Fib/Aktuell, 1974:33.

Veckan (from 1994 *Se & Hör*), *Svensk Damtidning & Året Runt*. The *Vecko Journalen* stopped publishing in 1980. The others were refused own interviews but published pictorial reports, excerpts from other people's interviews, surveys of the circle of friends and what else they came across. Court journalism proper - the little that occurred - was done by the daily newspapers, SR/SVT and the year, anniversary & feature books. *Svensk Damtidning's & Hänt i Veckan's* court journalists were at times barred from the court's own arrangements but could attend the official events. Barbro Hultman at the Court's information department describes the period as a highpoint of SVT's court journalism:

”The King was amused to contribute with good ideas [to SVT's ”Year with the Royal Family”]. The famous sausage stuffing sequence from Drottningholm - ”More meat! More meat!” - was his idea was just like the trampoline jump and the clothes swim in GIH's swimming pool, and the unforgettable pictures from the wet but charming intercourse with the dolphins in Kolmården's dolphinarium. The Queen was even one year persuaded to show viewers her personal wardrobe.”¹¹

The disadvantage of discouraging personal journalism was that the royal house became increasingly anonymous. The prevailing wisdom was that it took five years of intercourse with Carl Gustaf to understand him. In the absence of news, the reporting consisted of historical anecdotes, pictorial pages, forgeries, satires, repetitions, war style headlines & attacks. One clear trend was that the court journalists, the few remaining, became increasingly ignorant of their subject. This had several reasons: (1) The turnover of staff in the information department of the court and the ”omerte” attitude of the court circles meant that there was no one to ask. (2) The older generation of court journalists retired. (3) The newspapers culled their clip archives. (4) The subject is too narrow and too arcane for the journalists to bother with. (5) The ”Celebrity Journalists” rarely had any formal journalism training but were recruited on the basis of their network & interest in the area. (6) There was no tradition of serious personal journalism. What was written in that spirit was automatically perceived as defamatory. (7) Readers expected nothing of them. (8) The practitioners were disregarded by their colleagues.

Another effect of discouraging personal journalism was that journalists instead wrote biographies. These suffered from the same diseases (1)-(8) as their press articles + another disease (9) that the books lacked responsible publisher who could be held responsible for the fantasies. I would like to mention here in particular the editor of the weekly journal 1951-1965 Gustaf von Platen whose Gustaf V biography ”Behind the Golden Facade” (2002) contains such sexual slander that it should never have been published.

In connection with the 1993 20th anniversary of Carl Gustav's accession to the Swedish throne, a lengthy and infected debate began about the fawning before the royal house with no controversial questions asked. The main targets were *Svensk Damtidning & SVT's Året med Kungafamiljen*. The drivers were Annette Kullenberg (*Aftonbladet*), Ulf Nilson (*Expressen*), Stina Dabrowski (SVT) and Tom Alandh (SVT). Since Carl Gustaf did not allow the information department to participate in debates, Catarina Hurtig (*Svensk Damtidning & TV5*) defended both the royal house, the weekly press & court journalism in general: Hurtig had during her time at *Svensk Damtidning* seen some fuss in order not to offend the royal house, even contributed herself, but the most important factor according to her was that the readers were uninterested in the kind of scrutinizing reports that Annette Kullenberg called

¹¹ Hultman, 2014.

for, but wanted to dream away from everyday life. Personally, she thought it was important to review the royal house and its circle of friends to find corpses in the closet, but that any scoop would end monarchy she did not believe for a moment. Just look at Mette-Marit and the Norwegian royal house!

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The fawning debate seems to have died of its own in the aftermath of the Reluctant monarch. Scoop's special number 2011 about royalties was the end point. The court's boycott of interviews continued, with a break for the 2016 70th anniversary. April 28, 2011, SVT broadcast a tribute program¹² where Claes Elfsberg interviewed Carl Gustaf in the Royal Armoury & at Drottningholm Castle. Carl Gustaf was subdued. He complained that the media ridiculed his efforts and defended himself by saying that he had accomplished what he could according to the constitution. The most concrete part of the interview was about his role in the Saudi affair the previous year (see chapter 17). Afterwards¹³ the historian Henric Bagerius, the editor of Svensk Damtidning Karin Lennmor, the author & journalist Herman Lindqvist and the political scientist Olof Petersson were interviewed (Peterson in an old interview from 2004). Bagerius, Lennmor & Lindqvist spoke about Carl Gustaf's popularity & popular support. Petersson (erroneously) stated that Brunei was the beginning of the end. Later that evening¹⁴, journalists Thomas Sjöberg & Catarina Hurtig and Cecilia Magnusson (m) & Hanna Cederin (v) spoke about the press coverage. Carl Gustaf had complained that his efforts were ridiculed but in such vague formulations that no one understood what he was referring to. Everyone, however, agreed that he deserved serious press coverage. Media researcher Kristina Widestedt disagreed: If Carl Gustaf now felt so misrepresented in the media, he should put more effort into informing about what he did. Not like in the interview coquette with his efforts and then refuse to say anything.

The next day there was a reception at the Nordic Museum. Crown Princess Victoria gave a speech about her father's merits. Carl Gustaf was selfless, dutiful, loyal, knowledgeable, energetic, curious, committed, playful, humorous and respected the traditions of the office. The actual birthday on April 30 SVT & TV4 broadcast the festivities. SR published another interview, more of a conversation about his past life.¹⁵ Despite Victoria's assertion to the contrary, there was less talk about family traditions than in previous jubilees. More talk about meeting people's expectations.

No regular retrospective was published, but a photo book from Historical media "Carl XVI Gustaf : 70 år i bilder" with texts by Katarina Danielsson, former Femina editor. A similar minivariant was published in Svenska Dagbladet with texts by Carl Gustaf himself. The only newspaper interview was given to TT and printed in Metro.¹⁶ Carl Gustaf looked back on his life. He considered himself an ordinary person in an unusual situation. He had no plans to retire. Aftonbladet published an opinion poll in which 59 percent of the population wanted him to do just that.¹⁷ Nothing new with it. Other newspapers wrote editorials and/or interviewed people in the know without coming up with anything new either. Dagens Nyheter alleged that Carl Gustaf with the right of age had become more of a grumpy old coot who felt free to insult anybody he chose. "It remains to be seen what this new vulgar regent will

¹² Claes Elfsberg. Kungen 70 år : ensamt majestät. SVT, 2016-04-30.

¹³ Aktuellt. SVT 2, 2016-04-28, kl 21.00.

¹⁴ Opinion Live. SVT 1, 2016-04-28, kl 22.00.

¹⁵ Bengt Hansell. [Intervju med kung Carl Gustaf.] SR P1, Dagens Eko, 2016-04-28.

¹⁶ Malin Ekmark. Kungen: Har inga planer på att pensionera mig. TT & Metro, 2016-04-29.

¹⁷ [Novus opinion & TT, 14-20 april 2016.] I: Aftonbladet, 2016-04-26.

deliver before Victoria takes over.”¹⁸ The outburst seems to have been invoked by Carl Gustav's angry reaction against being attacked by two journalists who wanted to know more about how the renovation of Stenhammar was funded. Other journalists were more courteous. An essay was published on the political impasse on the constitutional issue.¹⁹ An essay on Carl Gustaf's media impact.²⁰ No essay on his role as Head of State, but a hate letter:

At the same time as the king symbolizes inequality, he obscures the sight of the rest of the crap; behind him hides a whole social class of parasites that would be forced into the open if we just took out the one Bernadotte.²¹

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The 75-year coverage was even thinner. No TV, TT or even newspaper interview but an hour-long ”conversation” in the podcast Värvet about. ”The King's relationship with Prince Philip, how it has been to work during the pandemic, what The King does to relax, searching for truffles, to philosophize in the forest, the spruce bark beetle, not to choose his job, what The King would rather do on the holiday and of course a lot about what the best thing about the moon is.”²² Responsible for what must be regarded as a joke was the stand-up comedian etc. Camilla Fågelborg & the advertiser etc. Kristoffer Triumf. The birthday present was that Expressen promised to stop demanding a Republic. Otherwise it was silence. Thomas Sjöberg summarized the situation as the Swedish journalists being in a total funk.²³

¹⁸ Malena Rydell. Bedårande bilder av monark. Dagens Nyheter, 2016-04-30. [Bokrecension.]

¹⁹ Cecilia Åse. Dags att börja ifrågasätta att nationen binds till härkomst. Kristianstadsbladet, 2016-05-01.

²⁰ Dick Harrison. Intressant framtid för en unik kung. Svenska Dagbladet, 2016-04-28.

²¹ Åsa Linderborg. Aftonbladet 2006-04-30.

²² Värvet 75-årsspecial. Carl XIV Gustaf. <värvet.se> (2021-04-26).

²³ Thomas Sjöberg. Medierna är fortfarande för okritiska till kungen. <gp.se> (2021-40-30.).

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