A political earthquake of considerable magnitude occurred in Norway in early 2007, and it illustrated how relations between political and mass media elites today complicate democratic elitism. The woman who led the Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), Gerd Liv Valla, and whom Norwegian media routinely characterized as the most powerful person in the country, suddenly resigned her top position. In addition to her leadership of LO, Valla was a national executive committee member of the Labor Party, the largest party and mainstay of the “red-green” coalition government at the time. When she resigned her LO position, Valla was in line to head the Labor Party’s candidate selection machinery, a pivotal location that would give her much influence over the choice of candidates for top party positions. But in an open letter to the principal tabloid newspaper, Verdens Gang (World Affairs) in late 2006, another woman, who held a mid-level position in LO’s bureaucracy, accused Valla of having harassed her to the point where the woman had to take sick leave. Verdens Gang and other media seized on this accusation as the basis for an intensive campaign to drive Valla from her leadership of LO. Like bees around a hive, the media swarmed around Valla, digging up allegations of other high-handed behavior by her and publishing a barrage of comments critical of her. Under withering assault, Valla concluded that she had no alternative but to resign and effectively leave Norwegian politics.

This was not the first time that Norway’s mass media waged a campaign ending in the resignation of a top political leader. A Labor Party prime minister and a cabinet minister had earlier been driven to resign after intensive and negative media assaults. Consequently, it is not surprising that many Norwegian political leaders, like their counterparts in other western democracies, regard the media warily, and media leaders and practitioners reciprocate this wariness. I want to examine this tense relationship and its implications for democratic elitism, utilizing some rich data from a major study of Norwegian elites that my colleagues and I conducted during 2000 and 2001 (Gulbrandsen et al. 2002).
The political role mass media play in contemporary democracies is a subject of much debate. The media are most often viewed, and certainly like to regard themselves, as constituting a ‘fourth estate’ that acts as a watchdog for citizens and voters in political affairs (Sparrow 1999). They are also seen, and see themselves, as constituting a main part of the ‘public square’ in which democratic debate and discourse takes place (Skjeie 2001). Similarly, the media are portrayed as a key two-way transmission belt for communications between political elites and citizens (Ostbye 1997). Other and more sceptical observers portray the media as agents of elites that help them manage policy agendas and mobilize mass support (Mills 1956; Domhoff 1967). Or again, political and media elites are depicted as linked symbiotically in a mutually advantageous giving and taking of information (Gans 1979). Mass media are also pictured as elite battlegrounds on which governments, opposing parties, and an array of interest groups fight each other in efforts to gain the upper hand (Schudson 1995). Alternatively, the media are also sometimes seen as communication channels for negotiations that regularly take place among competing elites (Davis 2003).

A trend in studies of the mass media’s political role has been to emphasize their independent influence on political outcomes. The media are shown to set much of the political agenda (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). By selectively choosing to play up some issues but not other ones, by simplifying the issues they select for readers and viewers and allocating greater space or airtime to them, the media act as gatekeepers and interpreters of political themes and information. Scholars devote much attention to how media define and give meaning to issues and connect them to the wider political environment – what is frequently called ‘framing’ (Gamson 1992). Some scholars go further and argue that nowadays the media drive the political debate, pure and simple. Given the circulation and ratings pressures on media organizations, journalists and television presenters exploit immediate conflicts and dramas that will gain market share while ignoring larger social, economic, or political complexities and settings (Bennett 1996; Sparrow 1999). It is also claimed that the media play a dual role, constructing and promoting frames of their own while simultaneously serving as conduits for the frames of others (Callaghan and Sewell 2001).