

English Summary of the Final Report of the project “Journalists’ Freedom (and Obligation) of Speech”

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Journalists have their say

This study examines the political role of journalism in Finland from the viewpoint of journalists. It asks whether journalism has become more interpretative and active in taking stances on societal issues, and whether interpretation has become a new imperative for journalists. It further looks at how journalists resolve the dilemma of objectivity and interpretation and whether they are willing to disclose their personal opinions and attitudes in the name of more transparent journalism. The study also contributes to the literature on journalists’ autonomy, examining how free Finnish journalists feel they are to decide the topics and viewpoints of their stories.

The study was based on focused interviews with chief editors ($N=10$) and reporters ($N=20$) in ten leading Finnish newsrooms and on a survey ($N=330$) that targeted reporters in daily Finnish newspapers. In addition, a content analysis of *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Keskisuomalainen* was carried out to measure the number of interpretative stories (defined by genre) in a sample week in 2000, 2006, and 2012.

Questions about the political role of journalism and the rights of journalists to interpret social issues are connected to the debate about the mediatization of society. According to the mediatization thesis, the media’s impact on society has grown because it has become more independent of other institutions, whereas the other institutions have become more dependent on the publicity controlled by the media. If journalism has become more interpretative, this would testify to the media’s active and independent role in society and thus support the mediatization thesis.

According to most of our respondents, interpretation has increased in Finnish journalism during the last few decades, and they expect this trend to continue in the future. They asserted that interpreting and providing background information on news issues are ways for the established news media to succeed in today’s Internet society, which is characterized by abundant and free news and discussions. In particular, the respondents linked the increase in interpretation to new interpretative story formats, such as “news comment” and “news analysis.” However, according to our content analysis, the amount of news comments did not increase from 2000 to 2013. Instead, the amount of news analyses increased, especially in *Helsingin Sanomat*.

The journalists were encouraged to write interpretative stories, such as comments and columns, but they did not consider this compulsory. Some journalists liked to write them, whereas others preferred news work. Interpretative and opinionated journalism has thus not become a new imperative for journalists. Instead, our interviewees felt that such journalism provided a welcome opportunity for writing to be more free and personal.

Our interviewees thought that interpretative journalism requires journalists to have expertise in the issue at hand. However, in recent years, newsrooms have largely broadened the duties of journalists. Departments that were once separate have been merged, and journalists are required to produce versions of the same stories for different publishing platforms. Such changes may make it more difficult for journalists to specialize in specific sectors of society and build the social networks needed to improve their expertise. However, according to our results, all is not lost. Of the survey respondents, 72% said that they are able to write competent comments and analyses on the areas they are covering. In addition, 40% disagreed, at least somewhat, with the statement that “the aim of the newsroom is more to have all journalists undertake all newsroom tasks than to have individual journalists improve their expertise in specific areas.” Furthermore, some interviewees stated that after several years of newsrooms promoting “multitasking,” there are now signs that they are starting to place greater value on specialization and expertise.

Interpretative journalism also evokes the question of journalistic objectivity and whether a journalist can be objective and interpretative at the same time. In debates on this issue, some have argued that journalists should admit that objectivity is impossible and that their reports are based on subjective interpretation. However, according to our results, Finnish journalists do not see the relation of interpretation and objectivity in this way. In the survey, 93% of the respondents agreed, at least somewhat, with the statement that “the journalist cannot present things ‘as they are,’ because the framing, sources, and viewpoint of the story are always based on consideration.” The journalists also admitted that they highlight social problems in their reports to encourage public debate. The journalists’ solution to the dilemma of interpretation and objectivity is that they are not exclusive. They viewed interpretation not as a barrier to objectivity but as a necessary precondition for objectivity.

Based on our interviews and the survey, we argue that objectivity for journalists denotes critical interpretation, not mechanistic representation of facts. Objectivity is a never-attainable ideal but one that can be approached by critically evaluating the evidence to hand. Criticality means here that interpretations should be based on comprehensive background material, complementary sources, critical questions, evaluation of consistency, and other such methods of criticism. Utilizing all these methods, journalists aim to present “a whole picture” of a news story and to ensure fair treatment of the parties involved.

Based on our interviews, the journalists believe that strongly challenging their sources in news stories will not necessarily bias the story. Challenging is permissible, provided that the grounds for doing so are evident or explained in the story. However, the interviews also illustrated reasons for the failure of critical interpretation by journalists. First, a journalist may trust only a limited number of sources and not search for alternative viewpoints. Second, a journalist may place too much trust in her own preconceptions or those shared by colleagues. Third, criticism may become an end in itself and a means of giving rise to commotion and scandals, even when these do not have a substantial basis.

Simultaneously with the criticism of the notion of objectivity in journalism, there is an increasing demand for more open and transparent journalism. The “promise” of objectivity does not seem to be enough anymore. The public wants the opportunity to evaluate factors that might affect how this promise is fulfilled. In our study, we questioned the journalists about their attitudes to actor transparency (i.e., how willing they are to disclose their opinions and personal values). In this respect, one-fourth of the respondents had a positive attitude to actor transparency, two-thirds were doubtful about it, and one-tenth of the sample was unsure. Age did not play a role in the respondent’s attitudes to transparency, throwing doubt on the idea that journalism is evolving toward greater transparency. However, the research sample may have affected the results. All our survey respondents worked in established newspapers, and it is possible that the newsroom culture in these settings is so powerful that the attitudes of younger professionals do not differ much from those of their older colleagues. Any changes in transparency in journalism may be more evident outside of these established journalistic institutions.

The most evident concern of the journalists regarding actor transparency was political stigmatism. Only 7% of our survey respondents said that they would feel comfortable about disclosing their political affinity in a column, whereas 52% said they would disclose whether they supported Finland’s membership in NATO. Some of our interviewees considered the issue of whether to disclose particular points of view and affiliations from the perspective of how important these were to them personally. If a journalist felt so strongly about a specific issue that it was not possible to distance oneself, the journalist preferred not to comment on it at all. This kind of ethos of nonattachment seems to characterize the political identity of most Finnish journalists.

The change in journalistic work into a more centralized direction does not seem to have diminished individual journalist’s opportunities to influence their own work. Own ideation is still valued in the newsrooms, and journalists can change the angles of their stories when they wish, if this is deemed necessary. Most journalists thought that the new, more collective way of doing is better than the old because discussing stories in progress will make them better and pick up mistakes, which can then be corrected.

In the newsrooms, there seemed to be a strong consensus about the aims of the work and the appropriateness of making interpretations and taking stances in each journalistic genre. Stories were seldom shelved because of “wrong” opinions, and the journalists did not think that self-censorship was an issue. Nonetheless, the journalists acknowledged that they had to be cautious about provoking “the most conservative one-tenth” of the audience and that reporting on the business of their employers can be a “delicate issue.” There did not appear to be much tension between the reporters and the heads of the newsroom on these issues. Carefulness was more like a collective attitude toward the audience, owners, and advertisers. The journalists also stated that the opinions presented in editorials do not restrict the spectrum of opinions in the news pages.

Overall, our study presents a somewhat more positive picture than reported in some other studies of journalistic practices and beliefs in Finnish newsrooms. Traditional values of quality journalism prevail, and the journalists believe that they are able to produce competent news stories, opinionated stories, and analyses. Despite the new collective way of working, journalists also feel quite free to ideate and report their stories as they see fit. It is possible that the journalists rationalized their positions and presented these in a positive light. However, we believe that looking at journalistic practices from the journalist's own perspective instead of having respondents simply talk about journalism in general provides a relatively accurate picture of the current situation in Finnish newsrooms.