

## Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

### Project report

## The Mediation of Expertise – The Functions of Expert Opinion in News Journalism

*Project director:* Dr Ville Pitkänen, Centre for Parliamentary Studies, University of Turku.

*Project duration:* 1.10.2013 – 28.2.2015

The Centre for Parliamentary Studies at the University of Turku coordinated a project that assessed the different ways in which media employs experts in news journalism. Who are considered as experts by the news media? Who are being contacted when expert opinions and analyses are needed in the media? The project approached the research questions from three different angles with three different types of material. First, the backbone of the project was the extensive set of data collected from Helsingin Sanomat, the Finnish National Broadcasting Company (YLE), and the Finnish News Agency (STT). Second, a survey was employed to map out social scientist experts' views on the role of experts in the media. Third, journalists were interviewed in order to shed light on the practices of media. The project was conducted by the project director Ville Pitkänen, PhD., and Senior Researcher Mari K. Niemi, PhD. The project had a research assistant Sini Ruohonen, M.Soc.Sc.

### *Data from news media*

The news media data collected for the project included 4 473 domestic, international and economics news articles. Approximately one fifth of the articles had employed an expert to comment on the topic. The experts' backgrounds are provided in Table 1.

	HS	(%)	YLE	(%)	STT	(%)	Tot.	(%)
<b>Researcher (Finnish)</b>	104	21 %	23	20 %	149	24 %	276	22 %
<b>Official</b>	109	22 %	29	25 %	134	21 %	272	22 %
<b>Affiliated researcher</b>	46	9 %	8	7 %	80	13 %	134	11 %
<b>Researcher (Int'l)</b>	54	11 %	11	9 %	40	6 %	105	8 %
<b>Organisational representatives (Finnish)</b>	48	10 %	7	6 %	39	6 %	94	8 %
<b>Central Organisations of Labour Markets and Unemployment Funds representatives</b>	25	5 %	17	15 %	35	6 %	77	6 %
<b>Corporation representatives</b>	21	4 %	9	8 %	35	6 %	65	5 %
<b>Economist (private sector)</b>	23	5 %	4	3 %	30	5 %	57	5 %
<b>Doctor</b>	23	5 %	6	5 %	27	4 %	56	5 %
<b>Organisational representative (Int'l)</b>	16	3 %	1	1 %	26	4 %	43	3 %
<b>Police</b>	15	3 %	1	1 %	16	3 %	32	3 %
<b>Other</b>	1	0 %	1	1 %	13	2 %	15	1 %
<b>Economist (public sector)</b>	6	1 %	0	0 %	5	1 %	11	1 %

As the Table 1. indicates, journalists are particularly inclined to contact Finnish academic researchers. However, the data also demonstrates that experts come from a variety of

backgrounds and, for example, the expertise of officials is utilised almost as often as academics.

Research also showed that journalists typically interview a single expert in their news articles. Only 30% of the articles included in the data had two or more experts interviewed. Experts are most typically employed to comment current events and issues and to provide background information for news stories. It was also noticed that reporting of research results was much less common and rather sporadic. In addition, the research showed a pronounced number of men being employed as experts. In the media data collected for the study, 72% of interviewed experts were male and 28% female.

#### *Survey – researchers*

The research project conducted a survey. The survey targeted researchers and was sent to 1 125 social scientists affiliated with the universities of Helsinki, Tampere and Turku. Altogether 293 of the researchers answered the survey. Of the respondents 146 were female and 147 male. The largest group of respondents were Ph.D. candidates (67), followed by professors (62) and post-doctoral researchers (60). The questionnaire was designed to investigate both the researchers' concrete collaboration with the media and their experiences and perceptions on the collaboration.

The survey indicated that the majority of researchers held a positive opinion about the collaboration with the media. Of the respondents 90 agreed or mildly agreed that participating in public debate is important and making appearances in the media is integral to his/her profession. Researchers considered giving presentations, being interviewed by the news media, writing op-eds and reporting research results to the wider public as the most natural ways to participate in the public debate. However, the majority, or 52%, of the respondents did not feel comfortable when commenting on current events. The largest barrier for participating in public debate was, however, the journalists' selective use of experts. Of the respondents 80% had received a couple or fewer requests for interviews per year.

#### *Interviews – media*

In addition to the survey that targeted researchers, the project conducted 11 semi-structured interviews in the spring of 2014. The interviews were conducted with heads of news, managing editors and journalists of domestic -and world news and economics. The interviewees were between 33 and 59 years of age; 7 of the participants were women and 4 were men; and their working experience spanned from 10 to 30 years. The media outlets covered in the interviews included Helsingin Sanomat, Iltalehti, Iltta-Sanomat, MTV3, YLE (radio and TV) and STT. The interviews were designed to map out the participants' experiences and views on experts employed in the media; to understand what are the media's practices to find experts and how expertise is utilised in the media; and to find out how collaboration between experts and the media could be improved.

According to the interviews, experts have assumed diverse roles in the service of journalism. They are needed to explain the world to ordinary people, to make news stories and articles more interesting, to contextualise current events, to be the expert voice that gives credibility to the message communicated in the news story, and to provide information. However, according to the interviews, experts are almost primarily contacted for their opinions and personal assessments.

## *Summary*

The analysed data indicates that while the researchers' attitudes towards the media are positive, several problematic issues exist in the collaboration between the experts and the representatives of media. Media analysis indicated that journalists utilise experts explicitly as commentators on current events and the interviews conducted with the representatives of media confirmed this. However, according to the survey among university researchers, majority of researchers do not feel comfortable commenting on current events or issues. Hence, it seems that the expectations of the two parties do not meet.

Moreover, the research results indicate that a strong gender bias exists in the selection of experts. The news media data demonstrates that the majority of experts interviewed in news journalism are male. The survey further noted that journalists are primarily contacting male experts and very rarely reach out to female experts in the area of social sciences. These findings were supported by the news media data. A majority of the journalists interviewed did not pay particular attention to the gender of interviewees. However, many believed most of their interviews to reflect the observed gender bias.

## *Societal influence*

The specific research results will be presented in seminars in Finland and abroad and published by Finnish and international academic journals in 2015. The project's preliminary results were announced in the seminar organised by the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation in November 2014 and attracted considerable public attention and interest. The researchers involved in the project have given numerous interviews since the preliminary results were published, written blog commentaries and op-eds and lectured on the topic for academic and non-academic audiences.

The most remarkable achievement of the project was a commentary written by Marko Junkkari, the managing editor of politics and economics at Helsingin Sanomat, a day after the preliminary results were published. Junkkari announced that from now on Helsingin Sanomat is working towards a more gender-balanced ratio in their selection of experts. Savon Sanomat followed the example set by Junkkari. Other medias, including Suomen Kuvalehti and the Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists, also discussed the project's results in their columns and blogs.

Although the project is officially ended in February 2015, discussion on the topic will be continued in the form of academic publications and at the conferences and seminars to which the participating researchers have already received invitations.

### Conference papers:

Niemi, Mari K. & Pitkänen Ville (2015): **The Use of Experts in Political Journalism**, PSA 65th Annual International Conference, Sheffield (Forthcoming).

Niemi, Mari K. & Pitkänen Ville (2014): **The Mediation of Expertise (Asiantuntijuus mediassa)**. (In Finnish.) Media Studies Conference 2014. Vaasa.

Pitkänen, Ville (2014): **Mediating Expertise**. ECREA's 5th European Communication Conference 'Communication for Empowerment: Citizens, Markets, Innovations'. Lisbon.

### Presentations:

Pitkänen, Ville (2014): **The Mediation of Expertise (Asiantuntijuus mediassa)**. (In Finnish). Helsingin yliopiston tiedottajat. University of Helsinki. Helsinki.

Niemi, Mari K. (2015): **The Mediation of Expertise – Finland and beyond**. (Asiantuntijuus mediassa – Suomessa ja maailmalla.) (In Finnish). The Finnish Association of Science Editors and Journalists. (Forthcoming April 2015)

### Blogs and columns:

Pitkänen, Ville. 'What an expert gets to say in media?' ([Mitä tutkija saa julkisuudessa sanoa?](#)) (Centre for Parliamentary Studies blog, in Finnish, 10.11.2014).

Niemi, Mari K. 'Who is missing from Finnish election publicity?' ([Ketkä puuttuvat suomalaisesta vaalijulkisuudesta?](#)) (Election blog, in Finnish, 15.1.2015).

Niemi, Mari K. [Why Media Relies on Men's Expertise?](#) (Centre for Parliamentary Studies blog, in Finnish, 04.12.2014).

Niemi, Mari K., '**Media produces and requires on call professors**' (Media tuottaa ja tarvitsee päivystäviä dosentteja). (Column in *Turun Sanomat*, in Finnish, 14.11.2014).

### Publications:

The list is updated once submitted papers are accepted for publication.

#### *Manuscripts:*

'**The use of experts, selection and the rise to an expert in the Finnish news media**' (Asiantuntijoiden käyttö, valikoituminen ja asiantuntijaksi nousu suomalaisessa uutismediassa) (in Finnish, Finnish peer-reviewed journal).

'**Mediating expertise. The uses of expert sources in Finnish media**' (international peer-reviewed journal).

'**Gendered Use of Experts in the Finnish news media**' (international peer-reviewed journal).