

FINAL REPORT SUMMARY IN ENGLISH FOR THE HELSINGIN SANOMAT FOUNDATION

Rajatapaukset: Median radikaalit kertovat, miten journalismi murretaan ja miten se pitäisi rakentaa uudestaan

Crossing boundaries: change-makers explain how to reconstruct journalism

Admitted

2020

Grant

76 000 €

Project started

September 2020

Project ended

August 2021

Other grants

No other grants

Responsible

Johannes Koponen, PhD researcher, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki

Other members of research group

Minea Koskinen, journalist and non-fiction author

Jussi Pullinen, journalist, Helsingin Sanomat

Veikko Eranti, Assistant Professor of Urban Sociology, University of Helsinki

Airi Lampinen, Associate Professor (Docent) in Human-Computer Interaction at the Department of Computer and Systems Sciences at Stockholm University, Sweden

Summary

Journalism used to be separated from other forms of communication via Journalists' code of conduct, ethical norms and clear boundaries between products and organisations. Now journalism is challenged by competing actors who don't want to or don't need to follow these institutional rules and practices. Yet some of them want a share of the credibility of journalism to fulfil their political goals or other motivations. At the same time, journalists have to reinterpret and redesign their professions to the platform society: often, they are asked to pick sides. This project investigated what new means can journalism fulfil its core task as a key maintainer of democracy in the platform society. The project included writing a nonfiction book for a broad audience about the characteristics of the new media environment. Moreover, the project furthered a thesis (monograph) to the finalisation stage.

Project goal

The goal of the project was to understand how decision-making, social media and the press practices and rules are dissolving and disappearing.

The project end results included a nonfiction book *Öyhökratia – ketä kuunnellaan kun kaikki puhuvat* (Pullinen, Koponen, Koskinen, Gummerus 2022) based on case studies and interviews, and the project advanced a thesis on the relationship between the press and digital platforms (Koponen, upcoming).

The research group started by investigating and interviewing journalistic changemakers – politicians, journalists and social media influencers and activists – who operated simultaneously in multiple roles. During the research it was noticed that the most beneficial contribution to the public discussion regarding the topic would be to communicate a broad analysis on social media power in Finland. The authors decided to avoid repeating discussion points from the popular discussions that most often describe the polarised social media in the US, and find out what is the situation in the Finnish context. The press in Finland is significantly more influential than in other countries, so the impact of social media and platform society to the use of media power was considered to differ from other contexts. Interestingly, based on the interviews, social media activists and influencers seem to be quite powerful in Finland despite the powerful press. The press itself is mediated by them. Because of this, social media is not just social media: it is an important part of how political decisions are legitimised and communicated.

The thesis investigates the change-makers of journalism from the perspective of boundary work and aims to explain how the structure of the public or publics have shifted in the platform press. The interviews and cases in the book provide a good starting point to conduct an analysis on the structural transformation of the journalistic institution and its relationship with publics.

Estimation of how well the goal was reached

4 out of 5. The project was conducted mostly during the pandemic which did unfortunately have a significant impact on collaboration of the research group. Not surprisingly, this made the thesis advance faster than was anticipated while the book was delayed to early 2022.

Most important results

The core contribution of the project is the public discussion about how social media has shifted the priorities of decision-makers and tactics of media power and mediated the press. This discussion was facilitated by a nonfiction book *Öyhökratia – ketä kuunnellaan kun kaikki puhuvat* (Pullinen, Koponen, Koskinen, Gummerus 2022). Furthermore, the project has produced valuable information about how news media produces and serves publics in the platform society.

The project investigated two key questions.

- 1) What transitions change-makers perceive in social media?
- 2) What transitions change-makers perceive in news media?

Based on the research interviews, social media does have a significant impact on the structure of public, democratic interactions. Influencers, activists, journalists and decision-makers have a dialogue typically within social media. According to the interviews, change-makers perceive three changes in social media:

1. Politicisation: The share and importance of advocating for political topics is growing in social media
2. Mediatisation: Mediatisation of politics is accelerated and the press is mediated, too, further influencing public discussions
3. Self-control: A cage of norms tightens around social media practices that increasingly are acted in loosely connected but distinct public sphericules

The structure of engagement, political debate and mediation is increasingly a rhizome of sphericules, where activists and influencers interpret, contextualise and selectively aggregate news and discussions "downstream" while journalists try to bring interesting insights "upstream", often collapsing their contexts while doing it.

Concerning news media, the interviews covered three different aspects of change:

1. Journalists keep up their professional identities as journalists via boundary work, but they are increasingly challenged because the press, in addition to decision-making, is mediated.
2. Features of the press in the platform society include collapsing contexts, limits of responsibility and role of platforms.
3. The business model of the press is changing. These include changes in objectivity, periodical publishing and professionalism, as well as increasing focus towards selected sphericules.

In addition, importantly, a gap exists between what journalists do on platforms and how they are differentiated from other actors on them. What journalists do, according to the interviews:

- Process and journalistic method: verification, fact-checking and best practices
- Finding topics of news from social media and elsewhere
- Offering legitimacy to topics and concepts
- Influence their followers
- Increasingly try to maintain a set of values and rights in the society

These patterns of behaviour are normative ideals or “reservoirs of meaning” about journalism and its potential. They shape the imagination of what journalism not only is, but also what it could be.

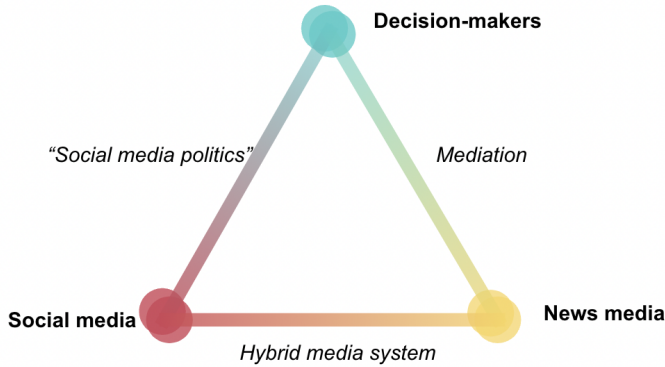
In the interviews, change-makers comment on how journalists are differentiated from other public actors. Journalists themselves are particularly loud in advocating a distinction from activists. However, change-makers mention only following aspects of differentiation:

- Professional ethics (to a large part copied by all whom were interviewed, and questioned by many of parts that currently don't belong to the ethical considerations, e.g. context collapses)
- Objectivity, periodicity and professionalism

The latter points regarding the operational model of the press, distinctions to other actors in the public are deprecating as parts of the business model, as was mentioned by some of the interviewees and as is further discussed in parts of the thesis outside the scope of this project.

To understand how journalism is changing, one has to look not only at the changing practices of legacy journalists, but also at the outskirts. Even if audiences always were active interpreters of the messages they received, social media platforms have emerged as environments for listening and commenting journalism. They are a new context for sense-making and encounters. Perhaps they also provide opportunities for a completely new kind of journalism, which just haven't been seized yet.

The institutional tensions between platforms, press and publics that were discussed in the interviews can be described via a simplified triangle of interactions between news media, social media and decision-makers.



From these three relationships, two are very familiar topics to communication researchers. *Mediation of politics* that happens between decision-makers and news media has been changing the way politicians present themselves to the public. *Hybrid media system* that is the convergence of news media and social media has been changing the way news media produces and values its products. The third interaction, here named "social media politics" is likewise widely researched phenomena.

Importantly, synthesising the interview results concludes not only that these phenomena are relevant, but also that their impact is broader than in between their respective elements would suggest. It is well known that hybrid media system concerns not only news media and social media, but also decision making. Similarly, mediatisation is not only something that happens to decision-makers – social media plays a special role in mediating news media too. And lastly, social media politics concerns not only politics and social media, but news media, too, changing practices, focus and news values.

Summary of results

Results	Core concepts
Mediation reshapes the roles of the press, decision-makers and the public	Mediation: how social media has agenda setting power, how activists influence journalists, how journalists try to separate themselves from activists, how "cancel culture" is used as a power tactic, and how social media activism shapes the publics.
The role of journalists changes in the hybrid media system	Hybrid media system: how journalists are becoming activists, how boundary work illustrates changing social structures, how the press causes contexts to collapse in the platform press, how self-branding leads to individualised media, and how platforms influence behaviours.

The structural transformation of publics and its influence leads to social media politics	Public sphericules: how social media publics have power over influencers, how power use is organised in back stages and operated by a small number of participants there, how sphericules frame the news based on their preferences and change the preferences and values in news.
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Publications

Non-fiction book *Öyhökratia – ketä kuunnellaan kun kaikki puhuvat* (Pullinen, Koponen, Koskinen, Gummerus 2022).

Thesis in progress

PhD Thesis (Koponen, upcoming in 2022 or 2023)

Presentations, lectures and trainings

Presentation in the Helsingin Sanomat Foundation *Muuttunut mediamaisema* seminar 28.10 (Koponen). Several presentations for Finnish C-level executives in President Institute trainings 9.3, 10.3, 24.3 and 31.3 (Koponen)

Media and publicity

Ylen aamu-tv 4.4.22 (Koskinen ja Pullinen)

Uutisaamu 5.4.22 (Koskinen ja Pullinen)

Review, HS 16.4.22

YleX (upcoming)

Yle Kioski (upcoming)

MeNaiset (upcoming)

Kansan uutiset (upcoming)

Puheenaihe podcast (upcoming)

Research materials and storing of research data

The project produced 30 hours one minute 46 seconds and 521 pages (Arial, size 12) of interview material that includes personal information. The transcribed interviews were uploaded to Atlas.ti, where the transcriptions were coded. The material is stored in a separate hard drive in a locked physical storage to which only the responsible researcher has access. The transcriptions are anonymised by removing names and other personal information and interviewees were provided an opportunity to remove segments they wished not to be included in the publications as direct quotes. These edited transcriptions are stored in a secure cloud storage and can only be accessed by the research team.