



THE BLURRING BOUNDARIES OF JOURNALISM.

**ETHICAL PRINCIPLES, PRACTICES AND
CONTRADICTIONS OF
EMERGING LOCAL MEDIA**

Päivälehti Museum March 31st 2023

**Seminar 'Not all journalists are critical
watchdogs'**



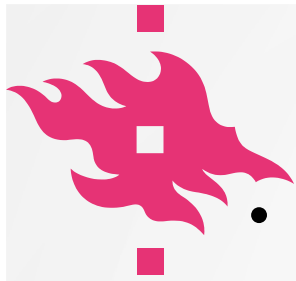
RATIONALE

- Journalism is distinct from other forms of communication particularly owing to its ethics and related journalistic practice (Singer, 2015)
- New forms of journalism, commercial communication, social media practices, algorithmic media logics and public relations are intertwining, combining an array of ideals and practice
(Jenkins & Graves, 2020)



FOCUS AND THEORY

- New knowledge regarding the conceptions, practices and contents emerging in the middle ground between local journalism and other forms of local communication.
- The blurring boundaries between local journalism, strategic and marketing communications and civic information
- Object of the study is local interloper practitioners and 'media' operating on the boundaries of the journalistic field



- Focus on ethics as the “things” of boundaries
 - how actors in the fields of journalism and communications articulate and rearticulate journalistic ethics and norms
- Focus on role perceptions and role performance
 - the roles professionals attach to their work and what they think is important to accomplish in the community.
 - the roles that a communication or news outlet adopts in the local community.

(e.g. Mellado, Hellmueller, and Donsbach, 2017)



Our perspectives and data:

- Perceptions and practices of local interloper practitioners regarding ethics and boundaries of journalism and communications
 - Qualitative theme interviews
- Role performance of local interloper 'media'
 - Textual analysis of selected cases
- Perceptions of professionals within traditional local media regarding the boundary and ethics of journalism
 - National survey



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The ethics of journalism challenged

The blurring boundary between local journalism and communications

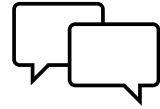
Seminar 'Not all journalists are critical watchdogs'. Ethical principles and journalistic contradictions of local communications outlets

Helsinki 31 March

Mikko Grönlund and Katja Lehtisaari

Introduction

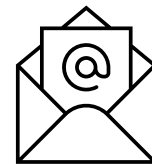
- New forms of local journalism and information sharing combine ideals and practices (Jenkins & Graves, 2020).
 - Less obvious what ethical principles many forms of communications rely on (Ikonen, Luoma-aho & Bowen, 2017).
 - How do Finnish local media professionals perceive the challenges of journalism ethics and the future of local journalism?
- How do they perceive the boundary between professional journalism and communications, and how do they see the relationship between the two to evolve?
- What are the ethical challenges?
- What are the scenarios on the future relationship between local journalism and communications?



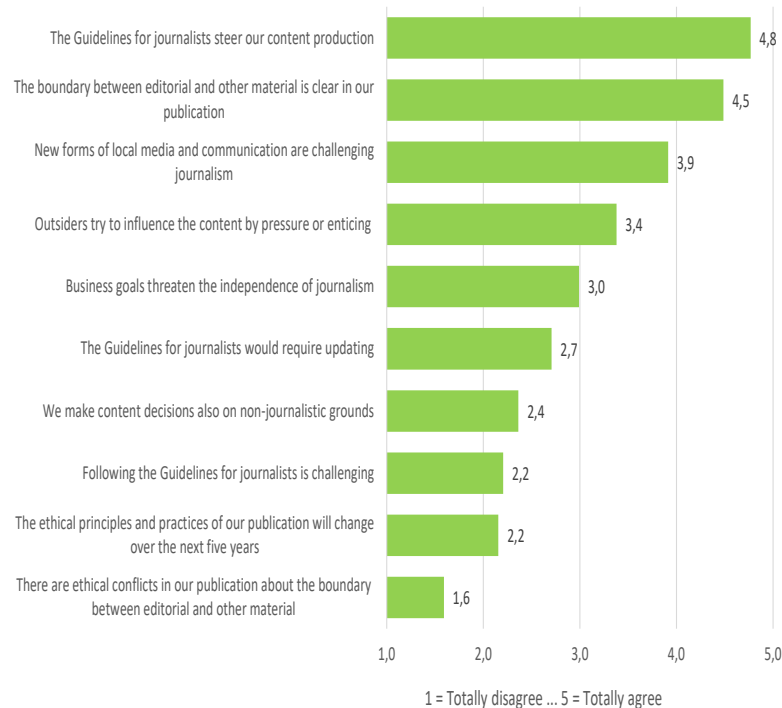


Online survey

- Conducted 12/2020, 103 responses were collected (response rate 38 %).
- Editors-in-chief and other key personnel of local and regional newspapers, free-sheets, and hyperlocal publications.
- Views on content and objectives of the publication, guidelines on ethics, and the boundary between journalism and communication; Scenarios on the futures of local journalism and communications in 2025.
- Almost two thirds represented paid-for local newspapers.
- Almost all of the respondents were editors-in-chief



Guidelines for journalists and ethical principles, average (n = 103)



- Respondents are confident about their own professionalism and adherence to ethical principles
- The boundary between journalistic and other material is considered to be clear in own publication, but was considered to be volatile and vague in other publications
 - *There are ethical problems but not in our media.*
- Two-thirds of respondents feel that external stakeholders are trying to influence the content of their publication
- Business motives from inside are felt within the newsroom as an ethical concern

The boundary between journalism and communication , (average n = 103)

- Journalism and other communications operate in the same field with different rules.
- Means of journalism are increasingly used in other communications and this is expected to increase over the next five years.
- Almost half of respondents were unsure of whether the guidelines for journalists, a central element of journalism's boundaries, need updating.
- More than half of respondents believe that content produced by communications and marketing agencies as well as citizen journalists and activists weakens the position of professional journalism.
- The boundary between journalism and forms of communication is considered to be blurred and it will become further blurred among the public in the near future.

The boundary between journalism and communication

- *The use of journalistic practices and styles in PR and other forms of commercial or strategic communications is perceived* as the most ethically worrying trend in the relationship between professional journalism and communications
- The second response category shows an alleged trend of *citizens', firms', and public officials' inability to tell the difference between journalism and communications.*
- Third, the respondents emphasise the economic precarity of local newsrooms as well as the ensuing pressure to compromise journalistic ethics and adopt clickbait logics in digital news distribution.



Alternative scenarios on the futures of local journalism and communications in 2025

1. ***Journalism on the sidelines*** – The decline of local journalism continues due to the eroding business models of news and the intense competition from other producers of local media content.
2. ***Different fields, different rules*** – Local journalism and communications diverge and find their own niches in the local news ecology.
3. ***Everything is just content*** – Local journalism finds financial sustainability by embracing the styles and practices of commercial communications.



Futures Workshop

- For editors-in-chief and other key personnel of Finnish local and provincial newspapers, free-sheets, and hyperlocal publications.
- In Zoom in May 2021
- Working in two groups to anticipate economically and ethically sustainable futures for local news media by 2030



Workshop results

- Both workshop groups emphasised a need for journalists to better integrate in local communities, physical and virtual
- Operating in and for local communities gives rise to a range of ethical questions
 - Journalistic autonomy vs. serving the audiences
 - Journalists' exploitation of communities' knowledge production
 - Paywalls vs. open communication in communities
 - The power interests of social media communities vs. critical journalists

Conclusions

- The challenges around the ethics as well as the boundaries of journalism are topical issues for Finnish local media professionals.
- The confusion regarding the boundaries of journalism is becoming more severe as local communications become more professional and increasingly borrow from journalism.
- Of the future scenario sketches, (only) within “Different fields, different rules”, local journalism is able to preserve economic sustainability and journalistic integrity.
- Professionals see that local journalism has a positive future if it succeeds in becoming more distinct and relevant for the local citizens as well as developing practices that integrate journalists better in local communities.



PERFORMING JOURNALISM

MAKING SENSE OF ETHICAL PRACTICE WITHIN LOCAL INTERLOPER MEDIA*

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CONTEXT

New emerging actors in the local media landscape that operate in the intersection of civic information, journalism, and strategic/commercial communication

- Civic information: information that helps citizens to participate in political, social, and cultural life (Li, 2019)
- Strategic communication: organisations using communication to fulfil their mission (Hallahan et al., 2007; Thomas and Stephens, 2014)

In Finland, newcomers in the local media landscape include *municipality/parish-funded media outlets, commercial online media outlets (using native advertising in varying degrees),* and *social media influencers* etc.

- Municipality-funded media outlets have already gained prominence in Sweden (Grafström & Rehnberg 2019)



NEW LOCAL MEDIA ACTORS AS INTERLOPER MEDIA

We refer to these actors collectively as *interloper media* (Eldridge, 2019; Holton & Belair-Gagnon 2018)

- Interlopers are perceived as **change agents** that seek to transform the field of journalism and communication
 1. Implicit interlopers
 2. Intralopers
 3. **Explicit interlopers**
 - “Non-traditional media actors who may not necessarily be welcomed or defined as journalists or media actors and who work on the periphery of the profession while directly contributing content or products to the creation or distribution of news” (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018: 73)



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Field Theory & Boundary Work

- Society consists of differentiated fields: specialised, and semi-autonomous yet dynamic spheres of action that are bound together by a field's 'rules of the game' (Benson and Neveu, 2005)
 - In this study we had an emphasis on ethical practice that consolidate the 'rules of journalism' (Ryfe 2006) → **journalistic ethics as *doxa*** that embodies self-evident core values and norms of the field
 - **Journalistic methods and forms as *habitus*** that materialise journalistic doxa
- Journalism, its practices, and central concepts are debated, maintained and changed through **boundary work through which journalism's boundaries to other fields are defined** (Carlson 2016)
- The interlopers are perceived to be undertaking "**reverse boundary work**" in relation to journalism – that is, **they seek to expand to the journalistic field and exploit its cultural capital**, including the journalistic norms and practices that grant content credibility and trustworthiness



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: How do the local interloper media practitioners perceive the boundary between journalism and commercial or strategic communications in their work?

RQ2: How do the practitioners make sense of the ethics they apply to their work and how do they explain their handling of possible ethical conflicts?



DATA & METHOD

- 7 media outlets (pseudonymised)
 - financed and produced by municipality or city
 - produced by a self-reliant community or company but fully or partly funded by a municipality, city or parish
 - commercial media outlets (some relying on native advertising)
 - a social media influencer
- Semi-structured interviews with local interloper media practitioners (N=10)
- Thematic and open coding in ATLAS.ti



FINDINGS: FIVE RATIONALES

- i) 'We are not quite making journalism, but we borrow its practices and vocabulary'
- ii) 'Promotional or sponsored content has news value'
- iii) 'Making journalistically ethical compromises is necessary and okay'
- iv) 'Let us just do it first and think about the ethical principles afterwards'
- v) 'We experience pressure, but we are autonomous'



I) 'WE ARE NOT QUITE MAKING JOURNALISM, BUT WE BORROW ITS PRACTICES AND VOCABULARY'

- Ambiguous use of journalistic forms and vocabulary for communication purposes
- Contest over vocabulary

"Journalists have in a way hogged the word 'media' to themselves, [...]. It is said that a person, a leader can be a medium, a person can be a brand and a medium. So, I see that the word is more universal than how it has been applied in everyday language. And there are indeed strong reasons for that because we are creating the content that, for example, the mass media is using as it is. So we are quite close to the media in that sense, too." (City Media)



I) 'WE ARE NOT QUITE MAKING JOURNALISM, BUT WE BORROW ITS PRACTICES AND VOCABULARY'

- Exploiting the “loose ends” of journalism
 - Journalism is critical in its nature but there are also positive news → focus on positivity

'[O]ur media outlet is about combining journalism and communications. And the thing, why we are not doing journalism – this has been discussed a lot – is that we are not critical towards the city administration, quite naturally, because we are city media, so we cannot operate as watchdogs. But I would say that our operating methods are journalistic, and...yeah, it is maybe that which makes the journalism for us.' (Town Media)

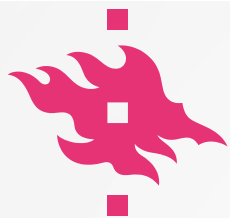


II) 'PROMOTIONAL OR SPONSORED CONTENT HAS NEWS VALUE'

- Strategic and commercial ambitions can be combined with journalism (ethical contradictions are not acknowledged or admitted)

*"It [the native advertisement] has to have news value so that it evokes interest. It cannot be like bragging that "we have the best petrol in Finland". [...] And then these stories are separated so that there is an indication about the commercial collaboration and the background colours are different so that **they can be distinguished from the neutral journalistic side.**" (Locally Now)*

*'[S]o, if something happens in a company—like growth, changes, informing—they have the right to write there [in the news feed]. They can write them in the form of a story; **you cannot really call that hidden advertising, but it is nevertheless writing about the life and viability of the area and the community** when the companies are telling positive news and things like that.' (Town News)*



III) 'MAKING JOURNALISTICALLY ETHICAL COMPROMISES IS NECESSARY AND OKAY'

- Cherry picking items to justify the journalistic nature of the content
- Ambiguous ethical guidelines
- Averting discussion about journalistic ethics and referring to other ethical guidelines or some sublime values

"Yeah, I think that we are following, or we do follow those ethical guidelines for journalists. Like I said before, for me the use [of the ethical guidelines] is emphasized in the stage where the news stories are being cross-checked. So those are the ones that we are following." (Town Media)

'[E]quality and human dignity [are important ethical principles], so I do not ever want to share anything that would offend some group of people in some way' (My Talk)



IV) 'LET US JUST DO IT FIRST AND THINK ABOUT THE ETHICAL PRINCIPLES AFTERWARDS'

- Ad hoc ethics: Ethical considerations are done "on the fly"

"I am not so sure, if I'm being totally honest, that if our town manager gets caught drink-driving, how would we handle the issue. Luckily, we have not yet faced such a situation but I think that at some point we have to think about it. [...] But I am the type of person who has always gone where the heart tells me. So in a way let's just do it first and think about the principles afterwards. Let's think about the rules afterwards." (Town Media)



V) 'WE EXPERIENCE PRESSURE, BUT WE ARE AUTONOMOUS'

- Shows how the ethical practice is inherently contradictory – acknowledging problems vis-à-vis the critical role of journalism but still perceiving own agency as autonomous
- Explaining ethical problems away

"[I] feel like I am biting a feeding hand if I start criticizing the municipality or the parish because they are the ones who are funding the paper. So the editorial board mainly just decides on the publishing timetable for the issues, maybe they give some topics that they consider to be nice to cover in the publication so that the residents get informed. [...] I can create content very independently, so no criteria have been set nor has there ever been any positive or negative feedback, like "Hey, you wrote a nice story!" or "Hey, why did you write like this?"." (Local Resident)



V) 'WE EXPERIENCE PRESSURE, BUT WE ARE AUTONOMOUS'

'We would be acting against all our values and strategy if we did not talk about them [difficult local issues]. But the way things are disclosed, so that they will be understood in the best possible way, there we can affect things through the means of communication. I do, however, remind [the civil servants and politicians] that it is not possible to turn black into white through communications. You must stick to the truth, but the tone can be altered to be more positive.' (City Media)



CONCLUSIONS

- Journalistic **doxa is being rearticulated** through **contest over habitus (vocabulary and practices)**
 - Sponsored content is framed as legitimate news, and promotional content is perceived as public service
 - Questioning the meaning of central words, such as "media" and "news"
 - Interlopers follow a trend where journalistic doxa is **contested by individual journalists or groups of journalists instead of news institutions** (Harte et al., 2016; Heft and Dogruel, 2019)
- Selective use of journalistic habitus:
 - **Controversial topics are avoided** and critical journalism is left for "others"
 - **Picking suitable items from ethical guidelines to justify the journalistic nature** of the publications
 - Results also show that **journalistic habitus is still important for individual practitioners**



CONCLUSIONS

- When it comes to ethical practice, it seems that for the interlopers it is **more about appearing to be ethical rather than being ethical**
- Thus, it could be concluded that **at the moment local interloper media practitioners are performing journalism instead of actually doing it**
- This study shows there is **a serious demand for ethical reflections on an institutional level** if such interloper media actors are to produce ethical promotional content through journalistic forms and methods



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THANK YOU!

A loyal servant of the elites or an ally of the civil society?

The journalistic roles of local Finnish interloper media

Seminar 'Not all journalists are critical watchdogs'. Ethical principles and journalistic contradictions of local communications outlets

Helsinki 31 March

Juho Ruotsalainen, University of Turku

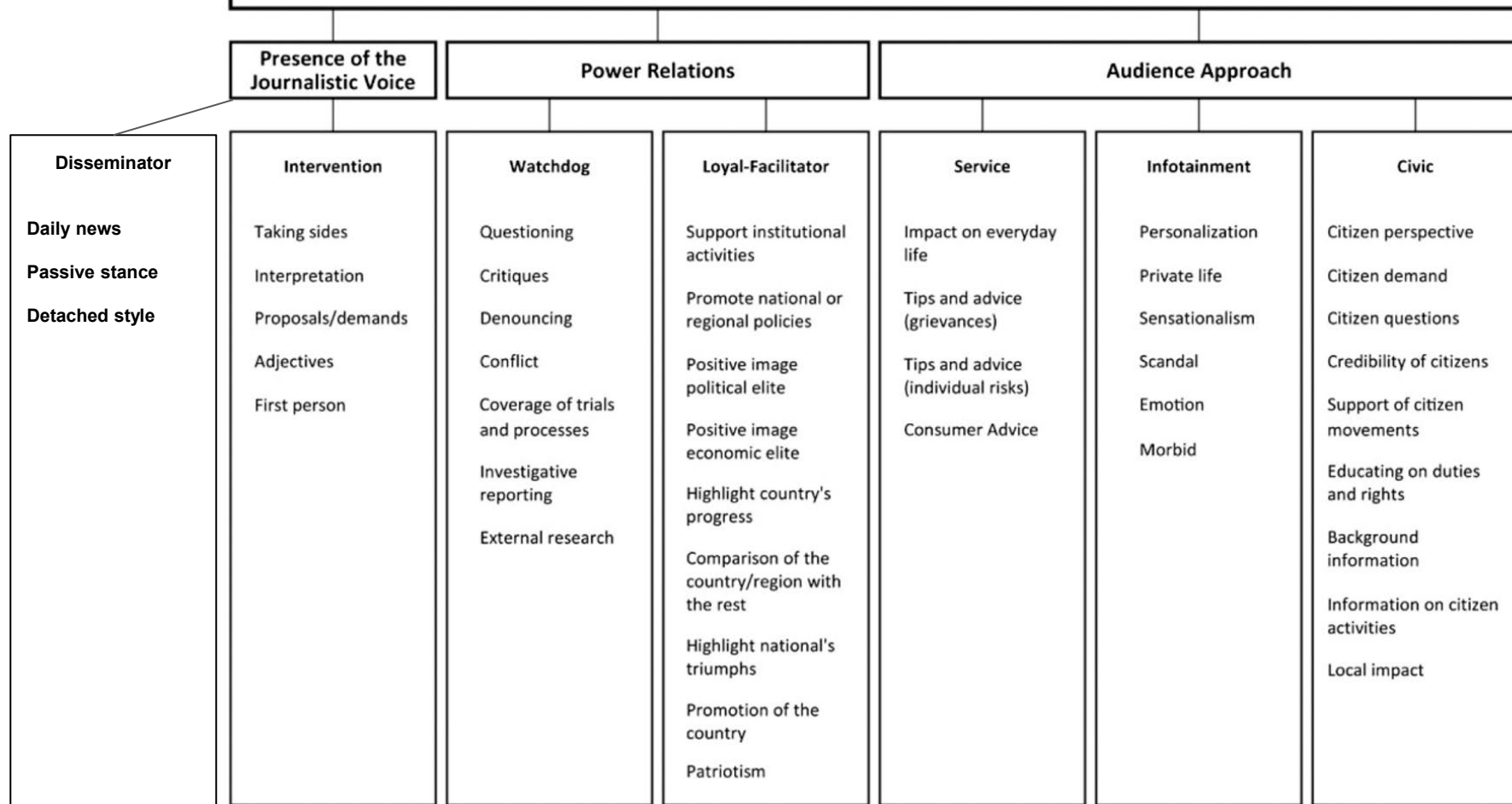
Interloper media as journalistic actors?

There are different kinds of journalism – what type(s) of journalism do Finnish interloper media claim to represent?

What journalistic *roles* do the outlets consider and perform?

Journalistic roles refer to the normative expectations in society and among journalists about the different purposes of journalism. Role perceptions influence journalists' behaviour on the job (Donsbach, 2008).

Dimensions of Journalistic Role Performance



Data and research questions

- Three local media outlets owned or funded by a city/municipality, and three commercial media outlets.
- Which journalistic roles do the practitioners *perceive* to fulfil? (Data: interviews)
- Which journalistic roles do they actually *perform*? (Data: published content)



Results

The interviewed practitioners *perceived* these roles as the most important ones:

1. **Loyal facilitator role** (91 coded interview passages)
2. **Civic role** (59 coded interview passages)
3. **Service role** (36 coded interview passages)

In their published content, the interloper outlets *performed* these roles the most:

1. **Civic** (742 coded content passages)
2. **Service** (707 coded content passages)
3. **Loyal facilitator** (454 coded content passages)

Role perceptions

Perceived *Loyal facilitator* role

Through *information*:

The interviewees repeatedly voice their loyalty to local authorities in information provision and explicitly refrain from a critical watchdog role:

“But of course our viewpoint is a bit different from the local news media. We naturally want to portray issues in a way that is correct [from the perspective of the city’s administration].” [Int. 1]

Through *localism and local community*:

The outlets serve their funders’ and owners’ interest by fostering local identity and a sense of belonging:

“We do not question or investigate [local authorities] – commercial news media covers that role. [Instead,] being an ‘identity media’ is very important to us, strengthening local pride and identity. My Town exists to fulfil its slogan: ‘We write about the Town with a warm heart’.” [Int. 5]

“When local firms tell positive news on our platform, they contribute to the spirit and vitality of the local community.” [Int. 3]

Perceived *Civic* role

Following the civic role, the outlets present themselves as being close to local citizens and serving their democratic participation.

A city-funded outlet, for instance, organises discussion events for citizens regarding upcoming municipal decisions. Another outlet claims itself a “citizen media” that produces knowledge from the “grassroots” [Int. 3].

However, in the practitioners’ discourse, the civic role is closely associated with the loyal facilitator role:

*“Whereas public officials communicate top-down, we want to include diverse local voices in our content. Well, **this actually comes from the city’s strategy of open and transparent governance**. We aim to enhance participation, that also the local residents get to voice their opinions and partake in decision-making and service development. Through diverse voices we also **want to increase the city’s appeal to visitors and newcomers**.”* [Int. 1]

“Civic washing” – it is questionable whether the outlets can truly consider the local citizens’ needs and enhance democratic participation as long as they exclude critical perspectives in their coverage.

Role performance

Performed *Civic* role

In their content, the outlets rarely give voice to citizen perspectives.

Instead, the outlets perform the civic role mostly by providing *background information* that contextualises and explains local issues and decisions.

Typical to such contextualisations is a temporal extension from the daily news cycle: the outlets address the recent history of local processes and decisions, or describe their anticipated future outcomes.

Investigative reporting, thorough news analyses that explain the different interests in issues, or critical scrutiny of those in power are absent in the outlets' content.

Performed *Loyal facilitator* role

In their content, the outlets support the activities of local institutions, and promote localism and a positive image of the locality.

The outlets typically quote officials' positive portrayals of issues, without a critical scrutiny or alternative perspectives.

Another common practice is the use of positive adjectives or expressions of opinion: “*The school represents the newest, state-of-the-art school design in Finland.*”

Conclusion

Loyal facilitator is the dominant role in the outlets' self-perception and content production – other roles are servient to the loyal facilitator role.

Loyal facilitator role is typically associated with news in authoritarian countries, where journalists often aid governments' development efforts, preserve social harmony, and strengthen national unity (Mellado, 2015).

The loyal facilitator role is in contradiction with most other journalistic roles, since it questions journalistic autonomy.

The interloper outlets' adoption of journalistic roles appears as opportunistic and strategic rather than journalistic: By performing journalistic roles, the outlets can make their content appear as more trustworthy and interesting, draw a distinction to PR and marketing, and thereby better facilitate the interests of their funders.