



COVID-19 NEWS, THE AUDIENCES' EMOTIONS, AND THE ROLES OF LOCAL MEDIA

Closing seminar of the research project
Museum Merkki, Helsinki 13.3.2024
Jaana Hujanen



RESEARCH PROJECT:

COVID-19 AND CRISES INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

Funding: Helsingin Sanomat Foundation (2022-2024)

Research group:

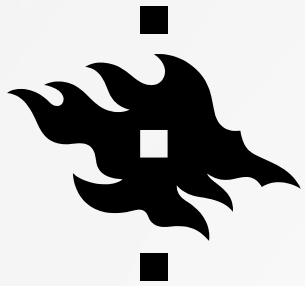
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Research manager Mikko Grönlund, University of Turku

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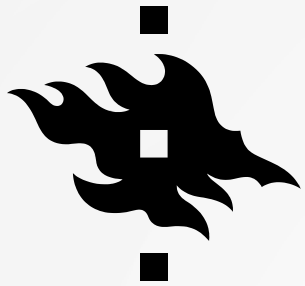


THE STUDY HAS AIMED AT GENERATING NEW INFORMATION ON, AND INSIGHTS INTO:

- The practices by which citizens use, assess and makes sense of crisis information and different media and their tasks
 - Uses and trust, emotions and affective practices, perceptions of media and journalism
- The changing roles of crises information providers
 - The theory of role performance (Mellado, 2015)

Context:

- Finland and the hybrid Covid-19 crisis information ecosystem



DATA AND METHODS

- Questionnaire survey directed at media audiences (within the case-relevant city)
- Qualitative thematic interviews (14) with media users
- National questionnaire survey directed at key actors within news media
- Qualitative content analysis of pandemic-related local news and communication from the viewpoint of role performance



PROGRAM

9.15-9.25 Welcoming words, Ulla Koski, Helsingin Sanomat Foundation

9.25-9.35 Presentation of the research project, Jaana Hujanen

9.35-10.20 *Vernacular Journalism*, keynote presentation, Karin Wahl Jorgensen, Cardiff University

10.20-10.40 *Fear, confusion and hope. Emotions and affective practices in COVID-19 news reception*, Salla Tuomola

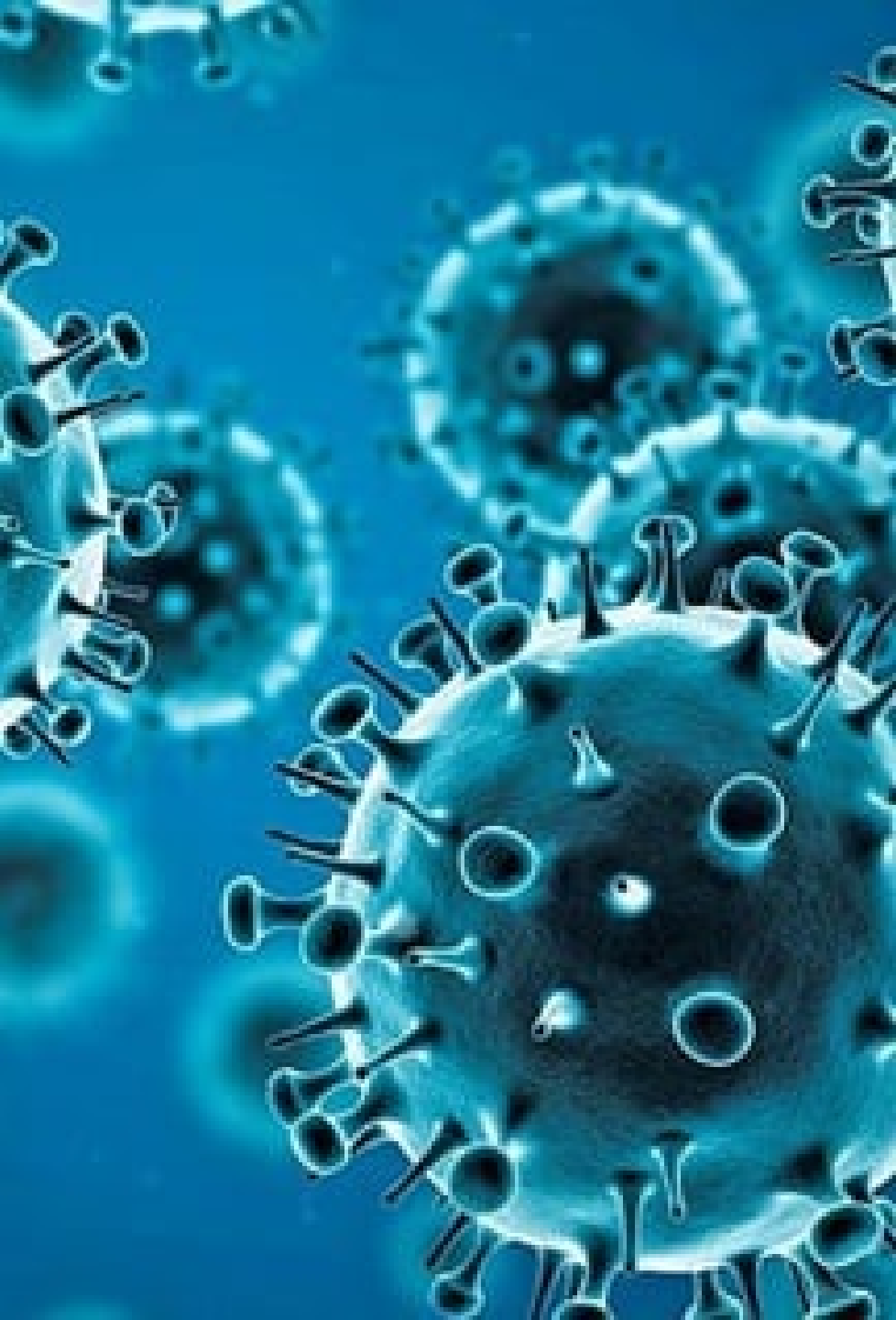
10.40-10.55 Break

10.55-11.15 *COVID-19 in the local news: Audience trust and journalistic roles*, Mikko Grönlund, Katja Lehtisaari and Juho Ruotsalainen

11.15-11.30 Commentary (in Finnish), Editor-in-chief Antti Kokkonen

11.30-11.55 Discussion

12.00 Closing of the seminar



FEAR, CONFUSION AND HOPE.

**Emotions and affective practices
in COVID-19 news reception**

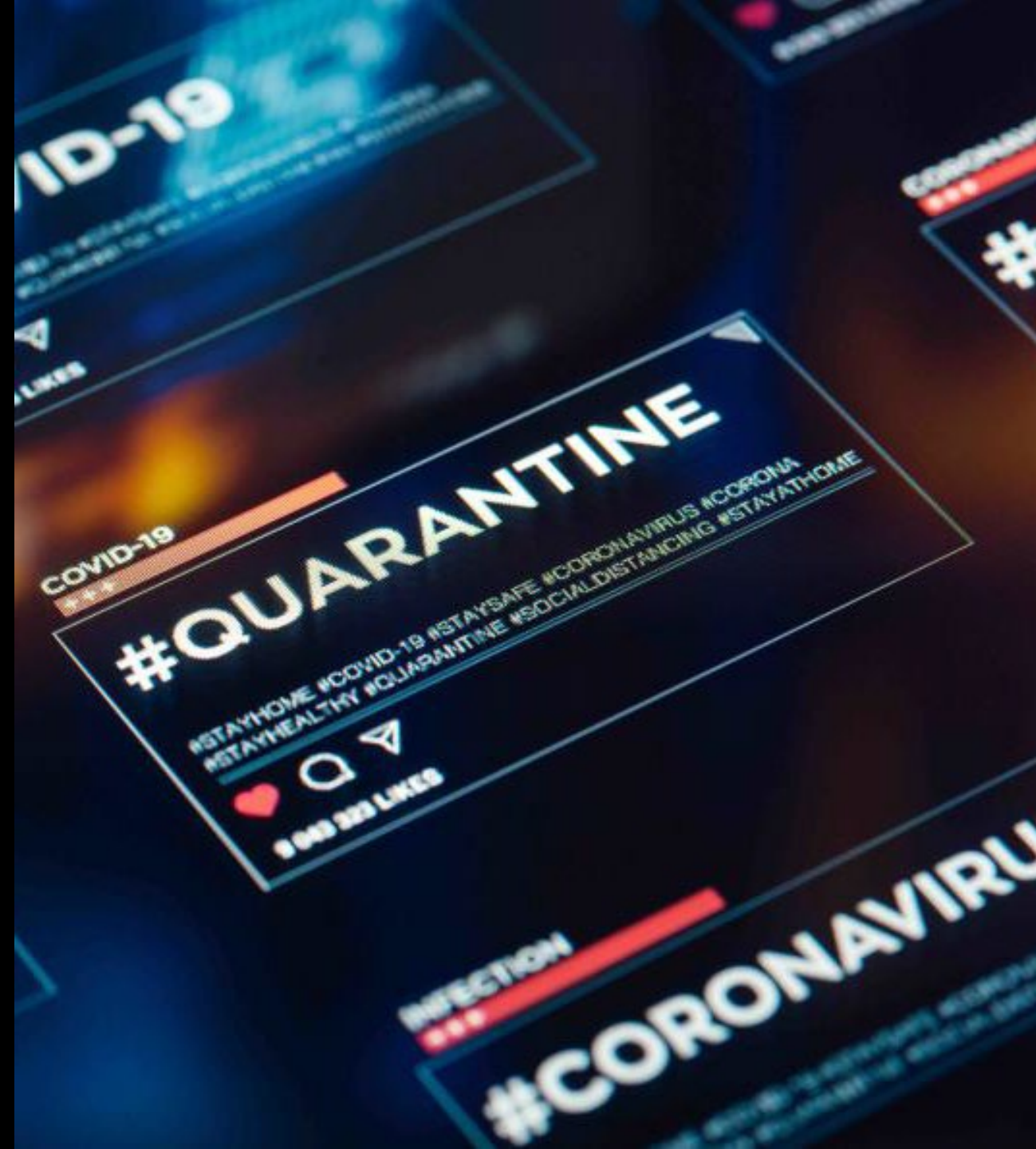
Salla Tuomola, Tampere University

**The final seminar of the research project Corona pandemic
and the ecosystem of crisis knowledge
Media Museum Merkki, 13.3.2024**

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

To examine media users' emotional and affective experiences of being exposed to news and communication regarding COVID-19 in Finland.

Additionally, the aim was to analyse further how the experienced emotions and affective practices influenced trust in and willingness to engage with legacy media during the pandemic.

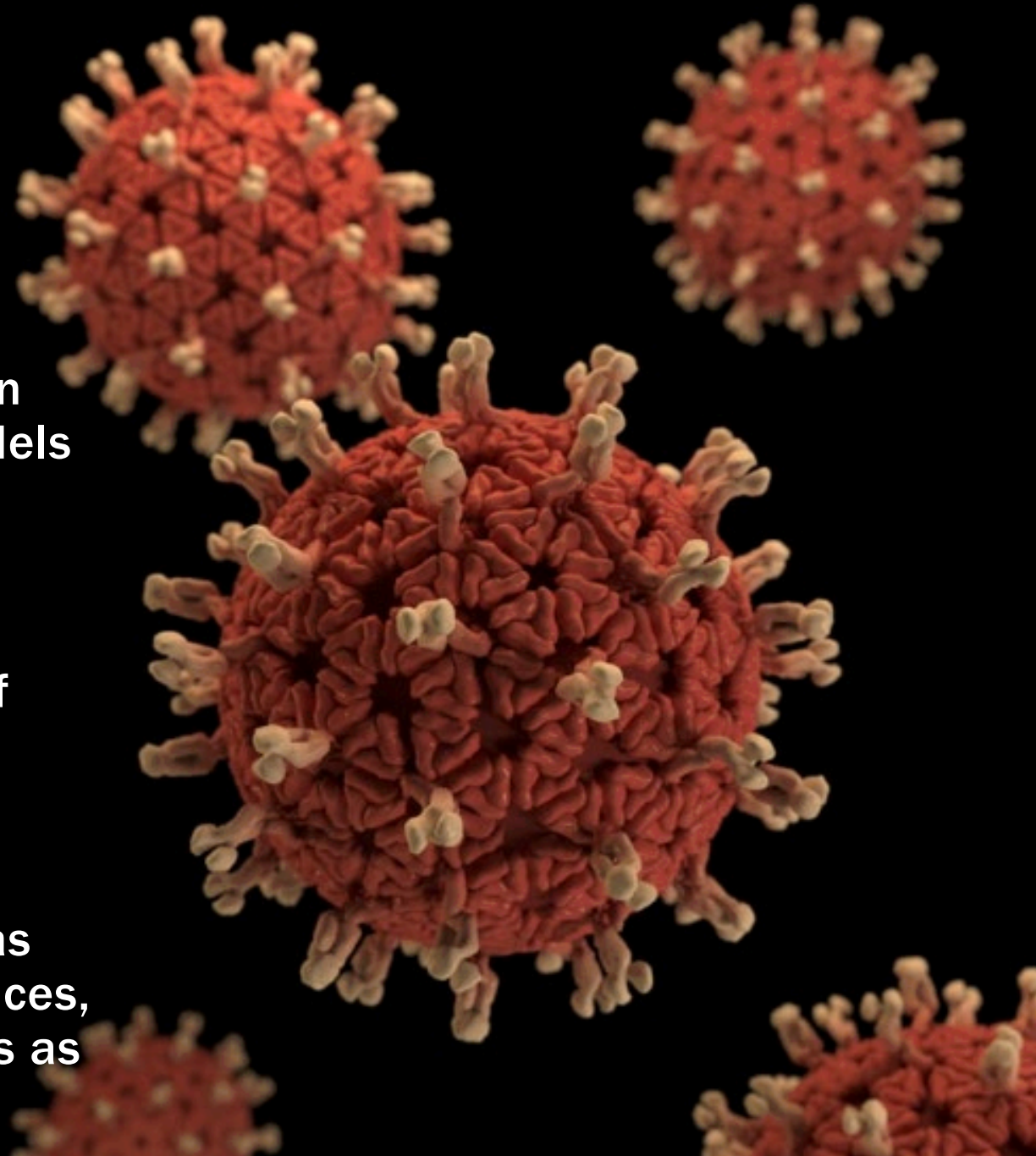


EMOTIONAL PUBLIC SPHERE

A concept of the emotional public sphere as an alternative to the hegemony of rationalist models (e.g. Papacharissi, 2015; Rosas and Serrano-Puche, 2018).

The emotional aspect of the public sphere highlights affect and emotions as indicators of social and moral values and as powerful motivators of political mobilisation (Massumi, 2015; Nussbaum, 2013).

We believe that emotion-driven activity, such as affective news usage and sense-making practices, reshapes the emotional public sphere and acts as a motivator of public engagement.



AUDIENCE EMOTIONS

We use the concept of audience emotions by Kolsch and Knoblauch (2019: 252–263), which was developed in relation to audiences that are bodily co-present at an event.

Audience emotions are not only a reaction to what is happening but also perform and reflect specific situational complications, communicating an embodied evaluation of them.

Audience emotions are material and cultural manifestations which merge social and individual dimensions of the blurred boundaries between affective dynamics and discrete emotion.



CRISIS COMMUNICATION AND AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated “how the media play a central role in **dissemination of fear** in times of crisis and uncertainty” and “that governments and other social actors rely on the mediation of fear to increase citizens’ perception of threat and motivate them to **act responsibly**.” (Ribeiro and Schwarzenegger, 2021: 2)

Studies on emotional audience reactions have elucidated **how conflicting the effects of emotional appeals** to the public can be (Hase and Engelke, 2022).

After the initial phase of shock, increased news use was followed by a phase of informational and **emotional overload** from the COVID-19 news for many people.

The World Health Organization (WHO) described the situation as an **infodemic** – an **overabundance of information** that made it hard for people to distinguish between trustworthy and unreliable sources.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: What emotions and affective practices do media users associate with COVID-19 news and communication?

RQ2: How do the reflected emotions and affective news usage and sense-making practices influence the media users' engagement with and trust in legacy media?

DATA AND METHOD

14 qualitative semi-structured interviews with media users were conducted between May and August 2022 mainly in the Oulu region.

The interview data were analysed via thematic categorisation (Gibbs, 2018) and using Atlas.ti qualitative analysis software, which showed the code distribution of the emotions in the interviews.



FINDINGS: MAIN GROUPS OF EMOTIONS AND AFFECTIVE PRACTICES

EMOTIONS AFFECTIVE PRACTICES

1. Fear Thirst for knowledge
Self-protection: news avoidance

2. Confusion Need of understanding
Criticism

3. Frustration Self-protection: news avoidance,
blocking or attacking different-
minded people
Adaptation

4. Anger Resistance
Social cohesion

5. Positive feelings Responsibility
Care

FEAR

“Of course, the whole situation has been **frightening and caused anxiety**, and if you have kids you **start to worry** how it impacts the family and the whole life, but I cannot say **whether the fear and worries originated from the news or the situation as a whole**. I have experienced the outcome of the media being relatively neutral.”
(I7: Female, 45)

“Those initial news stories from China and Wuhan **were tremendously frightening**.”
(I10: Female, 64)

“At first, they [journalists] inflated the interviews of ordinary people who said that COVID-19 has taken all their vitality and energy and they have spent one year in bed and all...” (I8: Female, 44).

Thirst for knowledge

Self-protection: news avoidance

Fear reportedly created **a thirst for knowledge**, especially at the beginning of the outbreak.

The participants described fear making them **search for all kinds of information** on the cause of the disease, infection rates and real-time restrictions and measures to determine how to adjust to the new situation in their personal lives.

Anxiety and fear were also connected to the affective practice of **consuming less news** to protect one's mental health – an expression of so-called **news fatigue** (Fitzpatrick, 2022: 145). News fatigue induced **self-protection via conscious and active news avoidance** (see Skovgaard and Andersen, 2020; Spyridou and Danezis, 2022).

“For three months, I tried to watch the news, but then I realised that I was going crazy... The more you read the news, the more you began to feel brainwashed. The ruckus was so, so loud, all about corona and that you will die from it. **I was so exhausted that I switched off the television when I realised that it had an effect on me.** And that was it.” (I1: Male, 44)

CONCLUSIONS

We argue that the diverse range of emotions linked with news is connected to how media consumers engage with and interpret information, both in overt and subtle ways.

The differences in the interviewees' trust in legacy media can be partly explained by the intensity of public engagement they had before the outbreak of COVID-19.

Despite their prior experiences, all the interviewees reported having felt fear at some phase of the news exposure. The intensity of their experienced fear was pivotal because it engendered the most divergent affective practices.



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- Spyridou, Paschalia and Christos Danezis (2022) 'News Consumption Patterns During the Coronavirus Pandemic Across Time and Devices: The Cyprus Case. World of Media'. Journal of Russian Media and Journalism Studies 2: 124–146.**



THANK YOU FOR LISTENING 😊

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COVID-19 in the local news

Audience trust and journalistic roles

"In a way, I would prefer a more neutral, conversational style" Covid-19 news, the audiences' emotions, and the roles of local media

Final seminar

13.3.2024 at 9 am to 12 pm. Media Museum Merkki, Helsinki.

Katja Lehtisaari (Tampere University), Mikko Grönlund (University of Turku), Juho Ruotsalainen (University of Helsinki)

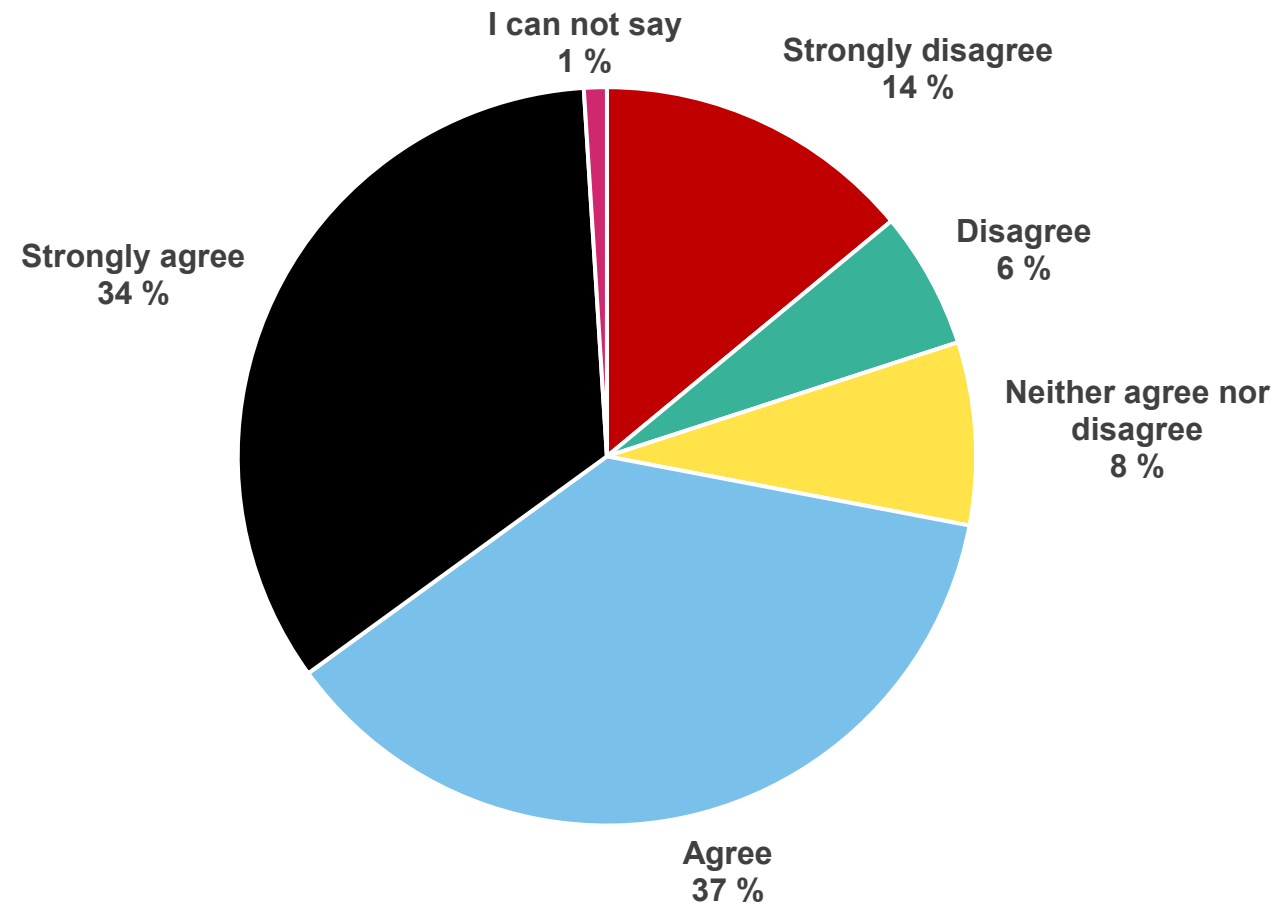
Goals & method

- Seeking information and understanding how citizens obtain and assess crisis communication.
 - Audience survey conducted in spring 2022
 - 506 respondents, Oulu region
 - (Plus a survey for editors-in-chiefs conducted in spring 2022, 66 respondents nationwide)
- RQ1: How do people evaluate the performance of media in their Covid-19 coverage?
- RQ2: What different orientations regarding trust on media can be found among the public?



General trust in Covid-19 pandemic news

- Almost three quarters (71%) of the respondents say that they would in general trust Covid-19 pandemic news and information in Finland
- One fifth (20 %) did not trust on pandemic news and information

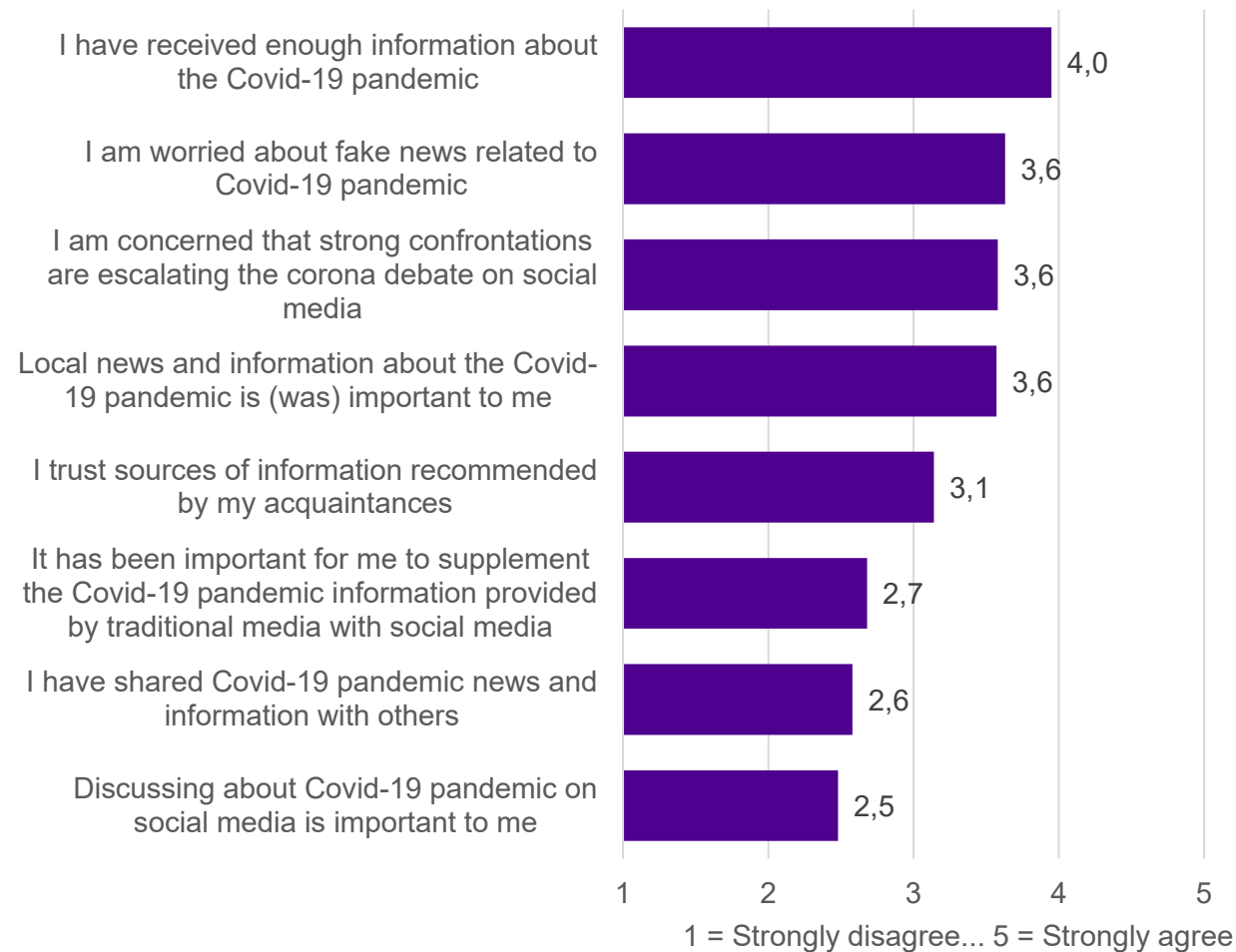


Tasks of local (news) media

- Thirteen statements were presented to assess the perspectives of the audience.
- The **transmission of official information** was seen particularly important, as was the **correction of incorrect information**.
- Rather important tasks for media were also e.g. **building and supporting local community spirit, serving the local residents, and providing solutions to Covid-19 related everyday problems**
- The public sees it important that local media **supports the activities of authorities and decisionmakers**
- Differences e.g. according to **educational background, gender and general trust in media**.

Audience's use of Covid-19 pandemic news

- The majority received sufficient information about the Covid-19 pandemic.
- However, there were concerns about **fake news**.
- The discussion **in social media** about the Covid-19 pandemic was important to only a few.
- Young adults, age 25-34, were most critical.



Summary

- The audience appears to be quite satisfied with the media's performance.
- However, 1/3 of audience saw media performance being one-sided or politically biased.
- Among audience, respondents aged 25-34 had the most critical attitude towards news media – lower trust in news media, less use of news media than in other groups.
- The audience values news that closely mirrored official COVID-19 information, as highlighted by Van Aelst et al. (2021). Does this suggest opportunities for news media to focus on their strengths, like providing accurate, timely information?
- In order to maintain and cultivate trust among the audience, news media should consider the characteristics and preferences of different audience groups.

Report

- Koronapandemia, kriisitieto ja media. Päätoimittajien ja paikallisen yleisön näkemyksiä koronauutisoinnista ja -viestinnästä
- <https://blogs.helsinki.fi/koronapandemiajakriisitiedonekosysteemi/files/2022/12/korona-netti.pdf>



Journalistic roles in local COVID-19 news

Role performance of legacy and non-traditional news outlets in COVID-19 news

Final seminar

13th March 2024, Media Museum Merkki, Helsinki

Juho Ruotsalainen, University of Turku / University of Helsinki



LEGACY NEWS OUTLETS

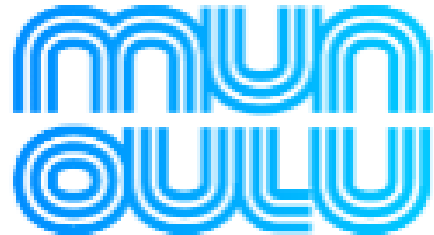
KALEVA



“STARTUP” NEWS OUTLET



ONLINE MEDIA OUTLET FOR THE CITY OF OULU



ONLINE MEDIA OUTLET FOR THE
OULU UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL





Journalistic roles in COVID-19 news

- 243 COVID-19 news articles were collected from spring 2020 to spring/summer 2022 from the webpages of Kaleva, Mun Oulu, Mustread, OYS Plus, and YLE Oulu
- In each paragraph of an article, all identified journalistic roles were "coded" for that paragraph in a qualitative analysis software
- The presentation focuses on the following journalistic roles identified and analysed in the articles:
 - *Disseminator*: publishing timely and accurate information, "who-what-when-where"
 - *Public mobiliser*: educating citizens on their duties and rights e.g. on vaccines, encouraging responsible behaviour
 - *Watchdog*: scrutinising authorities and other power holders, investigative reporting
 - *Loyal facilitator*: providing explicit or implicit support for authorities, portraying authorities in a positive light, amplifying their views (Klemm et al., 2019; Mellado, 2015; Nolan et al., 2024)

Results

Journalistic role	Kaleva	Yle Oulu	Mustread	MunOulu	OYS Plus
Disseminator: who-what-when-where, daily news reporting	28%	32%	4 %	32 %	32 %
Public mobiliser: education on duties and rights e.g. on vaccines, encouraging responsible behaviour	8%	6%	0,2%	14%	14%

The percentages indicate the proportion of each role from all coded segments for each media outlet



Results

Journalistic role	Kaleva	Yle Oulu	Mustread	Mun Oulu	OYS Plus
Loyal facilitator: support for institutional activities or authorities, localism	4%	1%	10%	9%	10%
Watchdog: criticism/questioning by others or journalists, information on judicial/administrative processes	2%	4%	7%	0,10%	0,10%

The percentages indicate the proportion of each role from all coded segments for each media outlet



Analysis: Loyal facilitator

- *Mun Oulu* and *OYS Plus*
 - Assured the efficiency and safety of local measures and institutions
 - Emphasised the importance of following official restrictions and getting vaccinated
 - *Mun Oulu* engaged in “feel good” stories that positively portrayed local life during COVID-19: “The Oulu trademark winter swimming is not on hold, and why would it be? According to enthusiasts, the sport reduces stress and boosts immunity”
 - *Mun Oulu* also positively portrayed local businesses in the event, tourism and medical technology industries
- *Mustread*
 - Instead of bolstering officials’ COVID-19 measures, *Mustread* lends support to local elites as they navigate the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures to contain it
 - For instance, the outlet endorsed a proposal by the CEO of Kaleva Media that the funds saved by YLE due to canceled sports and other major events could be redirected to subsidise local commercial media
- *Kaleva* and *Yle Oulu*
 - Supported officials’ efforts to increase vaccination coverage and urged citizens to get vaccinated
 - *Kaleva* occasionally supported authorities on more general issues. For instance, in an article about COVID-19 related deaths at the Oulu University Hospital, Kaleva provides backing to local authorities by reassuring that “Relatives have been understanding of the difficult situation”

Analysis: Watchdog

- *Kaleva and Yle Oulu*
 - Kaleva reported on sources' criticism about COVID-19 policies and measures
 - Yle Oulu also included journalists' own questioning and criticism
- *Mustread*
 - Reported decision-makers' criticism towards other decision-makers
 - The only media that openly criticised restrictions and described the Finnish policies and restrictions as “overly cautious”



Conclusion

- All outlets, except for *Mustread*, disseminate COVID-19 news and inform about vaccinations and restrictions – authorities' own media outlets did this the most
- Non-traditional media outlets, however, were prone to support officials and decision-makers and neglect their critical scrutiny
- Traditional news media, too, supported officials and conveyed a positive image of them, but also engaged in critical reporting
 - ➔ Citizens were likely well-informed regardless of which media outlets they followed
 - ➔ The critical *watchdog* role was low across the board – almost non-existent with the authorities' own outlets

Conclusion

- In general, the relative lack of critical reporting indicates that the outlets performed first and foremost as relayers and amplifiers of official information – in effect making *loyal facilitator* a defining role in the examined COVID-19 news (see Nolan et al., 2021)
- Globally, the *watchdog* role was less prevalent in COVID-19 stories than in non-COVID-19 stories (Hallin et al. 2023)
- A cooperative approach understandable in a crisis situation – journalists depend on expert knowledge and can be regarded as responsible for taking part in mitigating the crisis (Harjuniemi, 2023)
- In a time of multiple potential and actual crises, the news media may have to find a new balance between contributing to public safety and maintaining a critical, analytical and investigative distance to experts and other powerholders

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