



Adequate Information Management in Europe

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The Case of Finland

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1: News management and journalism research

The journalism culture in Finland, to a great extent, follows the main currents of the Western, Anglo-American tradition, highlighting the development from a political press towards professionalism aimed at becoming more independent from the political institutions and other power blocs. The media system has also been strongly influenced by public service policies that helped build a solid basis for the state-owned public broadcasting company (YLE) and transmitting the same ideologies to privately-owned newspapers and commercial TV channels. As tokens of this, the rate of newspaper readership, the legitimacy of the public broadcasting system and the status of news in the overall media supply have remained high. All of these features have, however, proved to be volatile; mainly due to economic crisis and the ideological re-orientation experienced in the 1990s.

While being a construction of publishers and communications policies, the Finnish media system has also been affected by the academic institutions. In spite of the fact that journalism is an open profession (no degree is required), the universities – and especially the departments of journalism – have played a significant role in strengthening the professional and ideological values of journalists. Some fields of study, particularly the history of the press and the research on public service systems, have effectively underscored the role of the media at the service of the welfare society and representative democracy.

On the other hand, journalism research in Finland has been strongly influenced by critical research traditions; political economy, sociology of news production and particularly cultural studies. Thus, journalistic practices and the self-image of journalists as professionals have been frequently criticised by journalism researchers (based on various theoretical accounts). This has made the relationship between journalists and academics sometimes uneasy and distant, albeit the attitudes have not amounted to plain hostilities, as, for instance, in Great Britain.

In journalism research, the relationship between journalists and sources is usually framed as a part of a bigger issue, namely the theory of professionalism, rather than a research topic as such (which is the case for instance, in political communication research). While political communication is a familiar theme to

Finnish journalism scholars, the studies representing political communication are relatively few. In what follows we attempt to explore analytically how Finnish research is related to the study of news management. In the typology we draw distinctions according to the epistemology and the role of the research presumed in a given study.

In epistemological terms we posit two views of journalism: the realistic and constructionist. The *realistic* view assumes that, in order to be useful, the news needs to be above 'management'. In other words, the best news is the news that is not manipulated by other than the neutral, skilful professional, who recognises the news, verifies it and is able to assess how reality is being 'managed' by various interested parties and who can distinguish the 'essential' in the information flows within society. The realistic view can be derived either from within the journalism profession (professional) or from the outside (critical). The professional and critical perspective within the realistic framework agrees with the goal of good journalism, but may disagree with journalists' capacities to do their job.

The *constructionist* view is a less common attitude within journalism, but it is a widely acknowledged framework for communication researchers. According to this idea, the news ultimately cannot be based on reality, but all representations are social constructions. Hence, 'the news management' is not an act of distortion *per se*, but rather the almost necessary evil of every act in the public sphere. News (or the way it manipulates and constructs realities) can only be judged and studied from the perspective of another construction or discourse.

The second dimension helps us to distinguish the functions that the research sets for itself. On the one hand, research can be based on a normative framework, articulating *a priori* some criteria for the news management. On the other hand, research may refrain from normative assumptions and claim to augment 'merely' analytical or descriptive understanding about its object. The dimension is, at least in theory, simple enough

Normative research sees its role as ultimately evaluative. The task of studying news management is to assess the news and perhaps come up with a suggestion of how journalism should work better. Norms

for the normative analysis can, of course be deduced from a number of different sources (reality, history, human nature, etc.) *Descriptive* research, respectively assumes its role as some sort of an outsider in society; an institution with a task of describing reality neutrally, avoiding a commitment to historical norms or interests. Arguably, all descriptive research is in some sense normative (trying to draw accurate and analytical descriptions of reality itself implies a task with some sort of mission). Thus, the analytical enterprise is descriptive, when it is not explicit, of how the criteria of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ should be read from the analysis. With these simple distinctions, the scientific landscape for studying, and the role and task of research on news management is as follows (table 1).

Table 1. Perspectives to news management: A typology

	A. Normative	B. Descriptive
1. Realistic - professional	1A	1B
2. Constructionist - critical	2A	2B

In the case of Finland, most of the research on news management can be placed in these four categories. The position 1A, suggesting that journalists are supposed to resist all attempts to manage the news, is best represented in standard handbooks on news journalism (cf. Miettinen 1988). Some scholars, who have delved more deeply in the practices of ‘spin’ control and news management, are more pessimistic about journalists’ capacities for resistance, but they still find the realistic-professional attitude the best antidote to manipulation (Luostarinen 1994, 1998; Uimonen 1992). The normative standpoint of news management can also be totally opposite: namely, a growing number of books and handbooks published in Finland that teach communities, companies and individuals ‘how to get your message through’. There is also a lively small industry of courses providing and developing skills of news management (Juholin 2003).

The descriptive and realistic view (1B) is best represented by political communication research. This research investigates, for instance, the practices of political campaigns and their mediation through advertising or the news (cf. Carlson 2001; Carlson &

Djupsund 2001), or the performances of politicians in televised interviews, debates or entertainment programmes (Isotalus & Aarnio eds. 2000). In these studies, the approach is strictly descriptive and often comparative: attention can be paid, for instance, to differences between Finnish and German discussion cultures in television (Nuolijärvi & Tiittula 2000). The research based on the position 1B (realistic-descriptive) is most common within political science and speech communication.

It is sometimes difficult to draw a distinction between descriptive analysis with realist-professional (1B) and with constructionist perspective (2B) respectively. Some empirical analysis on the interaction between journalists and their sources is descriptive but, for instance, studies analysing EU journalists’ work and the EU coverage before the referendum on Finnish membership tend to pay more attention to power relations that are dependent on discursive hierarchies in the given society or political culture. These studies argue that, in the political process completed in the referendum, journalists were heavily dependent on their routine sources or ‘primary definers’, and this owed much to the symbolic environment in which facts and values about politics are created (Mörä 1999; Heikkilä 1996). Given their task in describing the relationship between journalists and their sources – as it is played out in journalists’ self-understanding or the news – these studies avoid suggesting any common criteria of thinking about the phenomenon.

Finally in our typology is the research that is constructionist by its epistemology and is more explicit about the criteria of ‘good and bad’ practice (2A). In our view, the most important and challenging part of the research on news management conducted in Finland can be placed here. In these studies, news management is not treated as manipulative or corruptive to the principles of journalism or the public sphere as such, instead, these practices are evaluated against their adequacy, ethics, contributions to the quality of public discourse and dialogue, or wellbeing of individuals and communities. On the other hand, journalism is also evaluated against respective criteria. The normative basis for news management explicitly present in these studies varies from, say, public health to national security, or from the wellbeing of the environment to theoretically informed ideas about democracy and the public sphere (Aarva 1991; Väliiveronen 1996; Heikkilä 2001).

Table 2. Finnish journalism research perspectives to news management

	A. Normative	B. Descriptive
1. Realistic - professional	Research aligned with existing professional values and practices, identifying news management techniques, training journalists to counteract them. Safeguarding the transmission of reality-based news	Understanding the interaction of journalism and news management, no explicit goals for changes or improvement. Contributing to public knowledge about how to manage the news for anybody's disposal
2. Constructionist - critical	Research aligned with values that question professionalism (e.g. by enhancing participatory theories of democracy), identifying news management techniques, not merely to counteract them, but also to see democratic potentials (e.g. partnerships between news organisations and social actors) Safeguarding the quality of a dialogic, democratic public sphere	Research aimed at describing how the news represents reality and constructs news realities; research as a language game in itself. Producing interesting and alternative readings

The typology presented above helps to clarify different perspectives on journalism and news management based on different epistemologies and ideas about the functions of research. Firstly, even if different positions are not mutually exclusive in all respects, it may be useful to discuss what will be the common theoretical ground on which the empirical work in the AIM project can be established. Secondly, the typology may direct the research to look beyond the existing values within journalism and identities of journalists, and to figure out how future roles, functions, identities and practices of good journalism are embedded in the contemporary challenges to current journalism culture. Since it is highly unlikely that political cultures and journalism practices would coalesce into *one* news culture in the near future, the European public sphere (if we want it) has to be based on some sort of common, identifiable values, which then could be translated into different practices (although one might argue that this translation always somehow changes the very values themselves).

News management, despite its ambiguous and conflicted history and relationship to journalism practice, can be taken as a fruitful starting point to study the contemporary situation of journalism and democracy. It can serve us at least in two ways:

In terms of understanding the production of news, 'news management' should find its way into the basic research agenda of journalism research. As we know, a large part of the news is actually 'managed' more or less actively, but we are less aware of how it is managed in practical and empirical terms. How do the practices of news management change and how do they change what we mean by news? It would be of great interest to researchers, journalists and the public to be better informed about the current state of these practices and their consequences.

Thinking about 'news management' can also serve as a way of opening up the professional dogma of journalism into a more public reflection. So, in spite of the status of independence and integrity expressed in the codes of ethics and everyday practices of individual journalists, we know that, in more general terms, news journalism lends its resources to particular actors, social ideas and political objectives through permitting them access to public space. 'News management' can prove to be a promising conceptual frame for both descriptive analysis (what are the discourses or political projects journalism is currently lending its resources to?) and critical/normative initiatives (which discourses and political projects should journalism allocate its resources to?)

2: National journalism culture in Finland

2.1: Historical background

Newspaper journalism emerged in Finland in the late 19th century as explicit political activity. Its political aspirations centred upon the rise of a nationalistic movement pursuing national sovereignty and independence from the rule of Russia, and the formation of a Finnish-speaking national culture and enlightenment. The latter was distinct from the long tradition of Swedish speaking elite culture and governance in Finland that remained influential even after Finland had been annexed to the Russian empire (Liikanen 1995; Tommila & Salokangas 1998). In addition, newspapers became a prominent tool for the mobilisation of the working class and the political Left at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the years from 1905 to 1930 newspapers were explicitly political. The papers and the political parties supporting them fiercely competed over who had the leading status in regions and towns, ideologically as well as economically. In this competition the bourgeois parties proved to be stronger, which lent support to a gradual shift from a political press towards a more news-based and commercial model. In this framework, Anglo-American ideas about professionalism gained weight, but it was not until the 1950s that the emergence of a newspaper business and the professionalisation of journalists actually got going.

In addition to commercialism and objective news journalism, the journalism culture has been very much shaped by the development of the welfare state. The welfare state provided news journalism with an institutional design for how political interests and tensions were to be dealt with in society. This design strongly emphasised consensus-seeking and institutionally-arranged negotiations between political and corporatist actors. Journalism quite naturally became integrated into this culture. The system of 'politics proper' provided journalism with regular news beats and constant flows of information, and it was the function of journalists to distribute the news to the public. In the welfare state, news journalism was conceived of as an essential institution for citizens, who were supposed to keep track of the development of society through newspapers, radio and television. Even those who could not afford to subscribe to a newspaper were entitled to do so through social secu-

rity benefits. A somewhat similar social and ideological system was established in other Nordic countries: Sweden, Norway and Denmark (for the Swedish case, see Ekecrantz & Olsson 1994).

From the 1980s the structures, practices and ideologies of the welfare state became questioned as the result of a large cultural shift (Alasuutari 1996). Journalism became a public site for voicing this criticism and the media became more and more responsive to ideas that marked the shift from bureaucratic governance and a regulated economy towards 'more freedom' in economics, politics and consumption. This shift has brought about a number of changes in terms of content and the tone of journalism. Some of them allude to a tabloidisation process: The circulation figures of entertainment magazines and (semi-) popular newspapers are on the rise, while the regional newspapers and television channels invest more of their workforce in 'service journalism' that focuses on leisure time and special segments of the audience. On the other hand, the new political climate has also paved the way for talk shows commenting on politics and economics, investigative journalism and public journalism etc. Generally, journalism seems to have become more independent of political and bureaucratic actors, which has occasionally resulted in confrontations between politicians and the media and the juridical system and the media.

2.2: Political system and journalism

Finland is a multiparty democracy. Since the 1930s all cabinets have been based on political coalitions, which means that public discourse has emphasised consensus seeking rather than sharpening political differences. Until the late 1970s the pursuit for consensus did not, however, do away with short-lived crises within the party politics. Since the 1980s the status of party politics has decreased significantly, which has resulted in a very stable political structure. Shifts in the rankings of the major parties have been minimal, and although the cabinet coalition has been changed three or four times during the last 20 years, there have not once been premature elections. At the same time it is claimed that the ideological rifts between political parties have become more or less obsolete.

For journalism, the solidity of political culture has provided a relatively benign foil. Political agendas

have been formulated by the leading political parties and the necessary negotiations between interested parties have taken place more or less publicly. The relationship between politicians and journalists covering politics have been based on cooperation rather than antagonism, albeit the newer generation of reporters claims to maintain detachment from the politicians they cover. This attitude obviously owes much to images of the American investigative journalism *à la* Watergate (Aula 1991).

Since the 1990s, voices articulating some sort of 'legitimation crisis' of the political system (particularly that of an election-based, representative democracy) have become more numerous. No more than two per cent of adults in Finland are members of any political party. The turnout in all elections (presidential, parliamentary and local) has dropped steadily over the last decades, but still remain at the level of 60–80% (Borg 1996, 1997a). The greatest exception to the rule is the European Union parliamentary elections. In 1999 the turnout was as low as 31.4%. In 2004 the figure rose to 41.1%. In addition to staying away from voting booths, Finns have shown their dissatisfaction with politics in polls that indicate a growing distrust of politicians, the media and also the respondents' self-image as well-informed and public spirited citizens (EVA 2003; Borg 1997b).

Partly because of these concerns, there are some minor adjustments and reforms going on at various levels of government, all of them aimed at improving citizens' opportunities for political participation. These measurements comprise enhancing the resources of political parties to take part in political socialisation, new modes of civic participation in political processes and the development of online services for dialogical democracy. Also, reforms in journalism practice have been initiated under the label of public journalism in order to improve the quality of public discourse (Heikkilä 2001; Kunelius 1999).

Changes in the political culture also mean that new actors and political movements with new styles of acting politically have appeared on the public scene. Instead of the old class-based party system, new movements tend to articulate public problems internationally and locally, and focus on particular issues instead of a wholly integrated ideological agenda. These new political initiatives have referred, for instance, to globalisation and animal rights. It is argued

that journalism tends to react to these actors as 'alternative' or as idiosyncratic exceptions, taking traditional political parties as their framework for politics (Juppi 2004).

2.3: Legal framework for journalism

The conduct of journalists and news journalism is mainly regulated and safeguarded by two legal arrangements: the Constitution and the *Act on the Openness of Governmental Activity*. In the constitution the most fundamental principle is, of course, the freedom of speech. The act on the openness of governmental activity is in accordance with the constitution and it specifies citizens' right for information in more detail, setting up legally binding procedures for the transparency of government.

In the year 2000 the Constitution of Finland (originally designed in 1922) was partly rewritten. The updated version of constitutional rights and procedures of the political system places great emphasis on two sometimes-conflicting basic rights: freedom of speech on the one hand, and the protection of the individual's rights on the other. The tension between two fundamental rights has resulted in a cultural negotiation process, in which the boundaries of journalists' activity and the legal responsibility (including financial aspects) of journalism have been contested by the court system. Journalists have argued for a broad interpretation of the freedom of speech, whereas the courts (at least at the lower levels and often somewhat inconsistently) have tended to designate relatively high financial compensation for journalists in some controversial cases. Interestingly for the project at hand, these confrontations have also been taken into the European court system, which seems to emphasise the freedom of speech over the sacredness of privacy.

Journalists, or at least the officials in the Journalists' Union, seem to be alarmed at outside forces questioning the journalists' independence. This caution led the Union to rewrite the ethical codes of conduct for journalists. The new rules provide mostly technical criteria for assessing good journalistic conduct and deny all references to normative values that claim some sort of universalism (for instance, world peace or the wellbeing of the environment). These strategies clearly appreciate detachment as *the* professional attitude of journalists. (see Kunelius & Tervo 2004.)

2.4: Economic circumstances and technological developments

The economic context of Finnish journalism has shifted markedly during the last fifteen years. In the 1990s the nation as a whole underwent a dramatic economic crisis, which undermined the economic status of newspapers and electronic media. Over the last few years newspapers have been successful in balancing their economy and increasing their profits. This has taken place mostly through cutting their expenses and rationalising the production processes. The recovery of the economy has proven to be more difficult for television channels, which also need to cope with the costly digitalisation process. At the moment the financial situation seems very grim for the national public broadcasting companies, YLE, in particular. In years 2000–2003 the company has recorded a loss of 300 million €.

In the newspaper sector during the last 10–15 years, Finland has moved from a structure dominated by provincially owned newspapers and public service broadcasting into a structure of 3 – 4 strategically dominant, increasingly multimedia dominant, companies. At the same time the media industry has been transformed from a relatively closed sector into an open market economy, paving the way to faceless ownership patterns, more intense expectations for profits and sheer speculation on stock values.

The new economic realities in the media environment will mean that the resources of news organisations will be increasingly dependent on the ‘bottom line’. It is unlikely that the stronger grip of owners would directly mean that owners would control what comes out from the newsrooms, but certainly the economic constraints will increase the insecurity of journalists when it comes to their job opportunities.

The technological development will most directly affect journalism cultures in television production. The processes of digitalisation and convergence are under way, but their impact on media production, consumption and the patterns of public communication cannot clearly be seen since the analogic broadcasting system will still be in use for several years (cf. Lowe & Hujanen eds. 2003). It is likely, though, that digitalisation – along with the political, cultural and economic development – will affect the status of news and journalism practices particularly in television.

In the meantime the news still holds a prominent place in the media supply of newspapers and television channels, but the status of news will probably diminish in the near future. An early sign of this can be read from TV programming records. Between the years 1997–2001 the airtime provided for news and current affairs programmes increased, with thirteen hours in public services channels and with three hours in commercial channels. At the same time, though, the total hours for fiction increased, with five hours in public service channels and with no less than 21 hours in commercial channels (Aslama & Wallenius 2003).

The decreasing status of news is due not merely to economic interests, but also to technological development in the media sphere. It may be argued that news journalism no longer exclusively dominates the means of public communication within society. On the one hand, the network infrastructure allows new paths and nodes of information flows, sometimes bypassing traditional media outlets. On the other hand, the new technologies will open up new means for interaction between media producers and the audience.

2.5: Social status of journalists

The status of Finnish journalists has, for the last 50 years, seen a steady rise in terms of their salaries and their ranking among modern professions. Since the 1960s journalists have been seen as part of the middle class. According to information received from the Finnish Union of Journalists, the average monthly pay of journalists is 2885 € (year 2004). There are differences in wages according to which media the journalists work for and the positions they assume in the news organisation. In general, the salaries are highest in magazine journalism, and for journalists holding executive positions in newsrooms.

About 92% of journalists work full time. More than 90% of those who work within journalism are paid-up members of the Finnish Journalist Union, *Journalistiliitto*, although the membership in the Union is not an official requirement in order to work as a journalist. 54% of union members are female. Women gained a majority position in 1997 and the majority of students majoring in journalism and mass communication are female.

The information derived from statistics suggests that the journalists’ position in the labour market is quite

stable. It is known, however, that the newsrooms are currently undergoing an organisational change that will affect journalists' work more or less profoundly in the long run. If the late 20th century newsroom organisation was largely based on life-long employment of relatively independent individual journalists, the current trend emphasises more 'flexible' work contracts, much more team work and somewhat more planning in terms of news content. Terms of employment are also changing from permanent employment to a model where only key personnel (still a considerable number of people) hold permanent positions, whereas a growing number of journalistic tasks are conceived as specialisms (e.g. theme pages in newspapers) that are produced through sub-contracting.

Patterns of managing the news inside the newsroom are changing from stressing the individual reporter's work towards teamwork by reporters, who will be assigned to manage 'big story' of the day. At the individual level of news reporting this means much more interaction inside the newsroom (which might be a very good thing), but it also means much more collective control over the content of publications. Recently, there are signs in Finnish newsrooms of a change from 'professional' journalism to a more 'corporate' model of managing the newsroom labour.

3: The European public sphere

Much of the contemporary theorisation on the public sphere in Finland derives from international discussion on the topic, particularly inspired by the works of Jürgen Habermas. Habermas' theories and their criticism have been influential for dissertations and articles from, at least the late 1970s up to the present (cf. K. Pietilä 1980; Nieminen 1997). Undoubtedly, this discussion will be re-energised by the fact that Habermas' classic work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* was translated into Finnish in 2004.

Affected by Habermas and his critics, as well as by American-originated pragmatism, the public sphere has been mainly theorised in the framework of participatory democracy in local settings. This discussion has been interested, on the one hand, in the attempts to readjust journalism practices into a more dialogical fashion (public journalism) and, on the other, in the possibilities of utilising the new information and

communication technology in order to create new citizen-based practices for online publishing (Heinonen/Mäkinen/ Ridell/ Martikainen/ Halttu & Sirkkunen 2000; Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004). This research is usually normative and critical in character, which remains rather distant from, say, the political communication tradition, in which the public sphere and the mass media are often treated as synonyms. Thus, propositions have been made about looking for an intermediary perspective between the normative and descriptive analyses respective to the public sphere (Nieminen 2003).

Given the emphasis on locality and the predilection of modes of participatory democracy, it appears that the current academic interest in the public sphere in Finland does not come very close to news management and the possibilities of the European public sphere. The most significant project in the field was conducted in the mid 1990s in a joint effort by the universities of Helsinki and Tampere. This research focussed on the media processes during Finland's entrance to the European Union. The researchers concluded that the membership issue was reported and interpreted from a national perspective, which enabled the cabinet to control the meanings and representations of European Union (Kivikuru et al. 1996; Mörä 1999; Heikkilä 2001). The cabinet's strong role was later admitted by the political leaders themselves. Mauno Koivisto (1995, 544), then president, wrote that foreign policy was the main argument for the Finland's membership, but that it was wise to keep that issue out of the public agenda (see, Heikkilä 1996).

The cabinet's dominant role was, in a sense, achieved and maintained by news management. On the other hand, it appeared that no special strategies, let alone media gimmicks, were necessary, since the journalists, political actors and citizens did not strongly question the cabinet's policies and the unpolitical nature of public discourse about the European Union. It was only after Finland joined the EU that critical analysis was articulated. It was argued that the outcome of the political process was apparently a democratic one, but that the process in itself failed to be 'genuinely open, deliberative and engaging', whatever these criteria would mean (Heikkilä 2001, 152–153).

When asked in August 2004 about their current ways of covering the European Union, six managing edi-

tors from Finnish newsrooms argued that the quality of news on the EU has improved since Finland entered the EU. The editors believe that correspondents stationed in Brussels and reporters in Finland have gained more experience and expertise on subject matter in the European Union. The editors explain how the EU no longer carries mystical meanings that 'mortal journalists' could not understand. Instead, the newsrooms have been able to appropriate an 'EU dimension' as a normal and relevant aspect of their daily work and assignments. As a token of lost mysticism, reporting EU news is clearly not submitted to the responsibility of special correspondents, but is regularly tackled by 'ordinary reporters' at their home offices.

At the moment there is no up-to-date empirical evidence to either corroborate or question the editors' perceptions. It seems clear, though, that the European Union maintains a prominent place in the news judgments of Finnish news journalism. Editors estimate that they publish 20-50 news items on the European Union on a weekly basis. Without systematic analysis of the EU coverage it is difficult to conclude to what extent the EU is perceived as international news, to be dealt with by foreign desks, or domestic news, tackled by reporters from the national news section. One respondent confirmed this ambiguity by claiming that it is no longer possible to distinguish these categories when covering news of the EU.

Even if the editors seem confident about the quality of EU news and the expertise of reporters covering the EU, it appears that Finnish news journalism still maintains a national perspective on the European Union. When editors were asked to name relevant sources for EU information, five out of six respondents mentioned first the representatives of national institutions: ministries and Finnish civil servants stationed in Brussels. Only one editor was careful in stressing that national sources need to be balanced with news sources from other EU countries.

Since only a few newspapers and TV news channels can afford to send correspondents to Brussels, Strasbourg – or even to Helsinki – the majority of the news media is strongly dependent on the news feed from the Finnish News Agency (STT). According to surveys, journalists working at their home offices expect that the news agency would provide them with "basic news" of national interest rather than in-depth analy-

sis (Heikkilä 2000). When asked about the EU news in particular, however, only 48% of journalists (74 out of 155 respondents) claimed that the STT serves their demands satisfactorily when it comes to the news on the EU (Suikkanen 2004, 40–42).

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