

Is the age of impartial journalism over?  
The neutrality principle and audience distrust in mainstream news

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## Introduction

With the recent popular and academic concern over the rise of disinformation, fake news and the overall decay of the digital information environment, questions about citizens' decreasing trust in the media have become urgent especially in western liberal democracies. Whereas much of the earlier research attributed the erosion of trust in the news media to increasingly negative and cynical reporting and the growing frequency of media scandals (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Gronke and Cook 2007; Hopmann et al. 2015), recent studies have sought to connect it to more general trends in western societies, including political polarisation and the growing dissatisfaction with democratic institutions (e.g., Ariely 2015; Hanitzsch et al. 2018). A key observation arising from this more recent debate is that distrust in the professional news media often correlates with non-mainstream, radical and 'populist' political views. Distrust of the media connects to a more general repudiation of elites.

It remains an open question, however, what the implications of this growing 'systemic' distrust, and the associated distrust in the media, are for journalism. This paper seeks to contribute to the recent literature by addressing the question of journalistic impartiality and its complex relationship with audience perceptions of media trustworthiness in the current context of highly politicised knowledge environments. Neutrality or impartiality has been one of the key ideals of professional journalism and often linked to objectivity as its central 'strategic ritual' (Tuchman 1972; Deuze 2005; McNair 2017). However, it is precisely this purported neutrality, and the associated sense of inauthenticity and non-transparency, that may be driving growing segments of audiences away from mainstream journalism (Newman and Fletcher 2017).

To scrutinise this hypothesis, this paper presents an in-depth analysis of popular perceptions of the news media's trustworthiness in Finland. Among other Nordic countries, Finland is characterised by universal media and communications services as well as by high levels of media freedom and literacy. The media has traditionally enjoyed high levels of public trust and has been regarded as an inseparable part of the mechanism producing general trust in societal institutions (Nieminen 2019). Nevertheless, as in many other liberal democracies, the political and media environments have been transformed in recent years with the demise of traditional centrist parties, the rise of the nationalist right, political polarisation, social media controversies and declining audiences and revenues for news journalism (Herkman 2017; Statistics Finland 2018). Finland thus offers an interesting case for investigating the potential erosion of trust in media and its implications for journalism.

Due to space constraints, this paper lacks a separate theory section and concentrates instead on the presentation of empirical findings. The following section briefly describes the data and methods on which the analysis is based. Subsequently, the analysis is organised into three parts, each discussing

key findings in light of the neutrality ideal of journalism: (i) the political and ideological factors related to audience perceptions of media trustworthiness; (ii) audience perceptions about media's power in society; and (iii) audience views about the performance of journalism. The concluding section further discusses the contradictions involved in the ideals of neutrality and impartiality for professional journalism when it attempts to maintain or regain its trustworthiness in the eyes of the public.

## Data and methods

The paper builds primarily on a 2019 survey concerning Finns' use of different media for accessing the news and perceptions of those media's trustworthiness. The survey was conducted by a market research company Taloustutkimus among the members of an Internet panel recruited from the population of mainland Finland by using methods based on random sampling (N=1053). The sample was representative of Finnish Internet users, and the findings could be generalised to that entire population, the Internet penetration rate being 90 percent among 16–89-year-olds in 2019 (Statistics Finland 2019). The margin of error ranges between 0.9 and 3.2 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ). In the analysis of results, I focus on the indications of distrust in mainstream news media, as well as on the respondents' views concerning certain aspects of journalistic performance and the media's role in society.

Secondarily, the paper builds on three focus group discussions that focused on the same topics as the survey. The focus groups were also conducted in 2019 and involved 26 interviewees in total (a group of students between 20 to 25 years, a group for 45–65-year-olds, and a group for people aged 65 or older). In the analysis, the focus groups are used as a complementary material to interpret and discuss some of the survey results. Accordingly, I concentrate on the interviewees' expressions of distrust in the media and reasons for that distrust.

## Analysis

Our survey indicates that, overall, trust in the national news journalism remains at a relatively high level in Finland. When asked to assess, one by one, the trustworthiness of the three major national news organizations – YLE (public service media), MTV (commercial television channel) and *Helsingin Sanomat* (newspaper) – between 70 to 83 percent of respondents regarded each as reliable (see Table 1). Conversely, only a small minority, 8 to 11 percent of respondents, actively expressed distrust of these outlets. The findings are consistent with earlier surveys on audience trust in news in Finland and the most trusted Finnish media brands (e.g. Newman et al. 2019). Accordingly, Finns continue to express high trust in the most prestigious national news media brands, with the public service media topping the list.

The case is very different when it comes to tabloid newspapers. *Iltalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat*, Finland's two most prominent evening newspapers, were perceived by the respondents as unreliable by a larger share of respondents (35 to 37 percent) than the share of those who deem them reliable (21 to 24 percent). These findings indicate that Finnish audiences are highly selective in their perceptions of media trustworthiness and clearly separate the so-called quality media from tabloid newspapers. The most important factor determining the level of trust in a news source seems to be the perceived professional reputation, quality and ethics of the organization that produces the news.

**Table 1. Perceptions of reliability of selected news sources\***

	<i>highly reliable</i>	<i>somewhat reliable</i>	<i>neither / nor</i>	<i>somewhat unreliable</i>	<i>highly unreliable</i>	<i>cannot evaluate</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>YLE News</b>	45%	38%	7%	5%	3%	1%	99%
<b><i>Helsingin Sanomat</i></b>	24%	47%	13%	6%	5%	6%	101%
<b>MTV News</b>	19%	52%	18%	7%	3%	2%	101%
<b><i>Ilta-Sanomat</i></b>	1%	23%	39%	25%	10%	2%	100%
<b><i>iltalehti</i></b>	1%	20%	39%	27%	10%	3%	100%

\* The percentage indicates the share of survey respondents evaluating each news source on a 5-point scale. The respondents were presented with the following questions: “How reliable\*\* do you perceive the following news media?”

\*\* The Finnish word ‘*luotettava*’ can be translated as ‘reliable’ or as ‘trustworthy’.

### ***Political factors of distrust***

Looking more closely at those who express distrust towards the foremost national news organizations, we find that perceptions of untrustworthiness are evenly shared among people with different education levels. Those with higher education were only marginally less likely to express distrust than people with lower levels of education (9 percent vs. 10 percent). However, among younger respondents (age between 18 to 34) distrust appeared to be more common than among older people (14 percent vs. 8 percent). A still larger difference opened between women and men, as male respondents were significantly more likely than women to regard the national news organizations as unreliable (14 percent vs. 5 percent).

However, the most striking gap in the level of trust opened according to the party alignment of respondents. More specifically, those who indicated having voted for the nationalist-conservative Finns Party in the 2019 parliamentary election stood out from the rest of the respondents (see Table 2). Among the voters of the other six main parties in the Finnish parliament, 78 to 85 percent regarded the traditional news media as either somewhat or highly reliable. Out of those who said they voted for the Finns Party, only 47 percent responded that way. Conversely, 34 percent of the Finns Party voters expressed active distrust in quality news media, while the share of those among other parties ranged between three to seven percent.

This rather startling finding suggests that audience trust in quality journalism in Finland is strongly associated with political identification. (According to studies, men have long been heavily overrepresented among Finns Party voters [for the parliamentary election 2019, see Grönlund and Strandberg 2019, 8]. Party alignment may thus also explain the previously observed gap in trust between men and women.) Criticism of the mainstream media has formed an integral element in the Finns Party’s political rhetoric and ideology (Herkman 2017; Ylä-Anttila 2020). Accordingly, the Finns Party has positioned itself firmly against the established parties and typically presented the mainstream media as being aligned with the established powers. Frequent complaints about the media coverage of political and cultural issues, as well as accusations against and disparagement of

individual reporters, has also led Finns Party representative to repeated conflicts with the media. As a result, an oppositional stance towards the professional media may have become a widely shared attitude among those audiences who identify with the party. Alternatively, it may also be possible to argue that the distrust of news media – or at least its expression – is politically motivated.

**Table 2. Perception of the reliability of traditional media\* among the supporters of largest political parties**

	<i>highly / somewhat reliable</i>	<i>neither / nor</i>	<i>highly / somewhat unreliable</i>	<i>cannot evaluate</i>	<i>Total</i>
<b>VIHR</b>	85%	9%	5%	1%	100%
<b>KOK</b>	83%	11%	5%	2%	101%
<b>SDP</b>	79%	13%	3%	5%	100%
<b>VAS</b>	78%	13%	6%	2%	99%
<b>KESK</b>	78%	14%	7%	1%	100%
<b>PS</b>	47%	16%	34%	3%	100%

Key: VIHR = Green League; KOK = National Coalition; SDP = Social Democratic Party; VAS = Left Alliance; KESK = Centre Party; PS = Finns Party

\* ‘Traditional media’ is an aggregate variable calculated based on respondents’ perceptions of the reliability of YLE News, MTV News and *Helsingin Sanomat*.

It should also be noted, however, that the Finns Party has been relatively successful in recent years in concentrating the conservative-nationalist vote. In polls and election aid applications, Finns Party voters and candidates consistently jump out on the basis of their conservative and nation-centric values (e.g., Grönlund and Strandberg 2019, 12–13; YLE 2019). Therefore, identification with nationalist-conservative views may be just as important as party support in explaining the relatively low levels of trust in mainstream media among Finns Party voters. Moreover, insofar as the sense that a news outlet’s reporting on issues generally aligns with one’s own worldview has an impact on the audience’s trust in the media (Coleman 2012), the findings suggest that the nationalist-conservatives may be increasingly finding that the mainstream news journalism does not represent their societal and cultural values.

In terms of the neutrality ideal of journalism, Finns Party supporters seem to pose a new and persistent dilemma for Finnish news organizations. The rise of the Finns Party and its maturation as an established political force over the past decade signals the emergence of nationalist-conservatives as an ideologically motivated group in Finland among whom many reject the notion of the national media as a neutral player and instead regard major news organizations as aligned with the dominant forces and culturally privileged (liberal) groups in society. Moreover, conservative-nationalist actors frequently express doubts and critiques about news reporting in

public forums, attempting to strip journalists of any appearance of neutrality (see Hameleers 2020). They not only claim that journalism and journalists are participants in political and societal conflicts, but also actively draw journalists into those conflicts: reacting to accusations of misrepresentation and outright slander, reporters are often forced to position themselves against phenomena often associated with nationalist-conservative ideology such as ethno-nationalism, racism and hate speech (Ojala and Pöyhtäri 2018). Making the mainstream news organizations their political and ideological opponents, national-conservative audiences deny journalists the very possibility of a neutral position.

### ***Institutional power: media shaping – and narrowing – audience’s outlooks***

Despite the overall picture indicating high levels of trust in quality news media among Finns, the survey also demonstrates that trust is rarely unconditional. In fact, apart from YLE News, which was perceived as ‘*highly reliable*’ by one in two respondents, most respondents were willing to express only moderate trust towards the mainstream news outlets (see Table 1). Therefore, while people tend to regard professional quality news reporting as more reliable than unreliable, that does not necessarily imply they would never have doubts about the news organizations. By opting to identify national news outlets as ‘*somewhat reliable*’, respondents appear to be claiming an element of healthy suspicion in their relationship with journalism.

What are the principal factors driving this suspicion? Both the survey and focus group interviews indicate that Finns widely perceive that the media exerts a great amount of power in society. In fact, 42 percent of the survey respondents opined that the media has ‘*too much power*’, while 49 percent saw that it has the ‘*right amount of power*’, and only 2 percent opted for ‘*too little power*’. The widespread unease about the influence media has in society is therefore likely to be one element in raising audience suspicions about journalism (also see Gronke and Cook 2007).

The media’s great power was also a frequent talking point and unquestioned claim in the focus groups, indicating the apparently widespread critical attitude among Finnish audiences about the media as a societal institution and its power in society:

The power [of the media] really makes itself felt if you think about it. Let’s take YLE or *Hesari* [*Helsingin Sanomat*], based on which quite many Finns form their opinions – it surely is narrow. It is. The majority of Finns probably follow these two, YLE and *Hesari*, and that forms their view of life, experience and everything else. I mean surely that power is enormous. (Male, 65+)

The interviewee’s reflection about YLE and *Helsingin Sanomat* having a great impact on people’s perceptions illustrates that the media’s power was mostly understood in terms of shaping how their audiences understand the world. In the survey, 89 percent of respondents agreed with the statement ‘*The media has great influence on people’s opinions*’, while 67 percent agreed with ‘*The media has great influence on major political decisions*’. This implies that the media is widely seen as an influential political institution, but even more so as an actor and institution that shapes our attitudes and values as citizens.

In this regard, as the quote above illustrates, focus group interviewees frequently expressed awareness of the limited and partial outlook of any given media outlet. However, whereas some appeared highly critical of news organizations failing to present all sides about issues, others

regarded the partiality of news coverage as an intentional and even well-intentioned effort to gatekeep the public agenda, excluding voices and views that might harm the public good (e.g., discriminatory or inaccurate claims).

These contrasting attitudes regarding the media's institutional gatekeeping power were also evident in the survey results. Out of the respondents, 65 percent were either in 'full' (15 %) or at least 'partial' (50 %) agreement with the statement *'The Finnish media gives space to different societal views'*. However, whereas 82 percent of the Greens voters were satisfied with the plurality of views in the media, out of the Finns Party voters only 30 percent tended to agree and no less than 55 percent were in 'partial' or 'full' *disagreement* with the statement. The more liberal respondents thus seemed to be more satisfied with the media's gatekeeping performance than the conservatives.

Even so, the nationalist-conservatives' frequent claims about the mainstream media favouring liberal views and the recent proliferation of alternative news sources online may well have impacted on how Finnish audiences more broadly conceive of journalism and its limitations. In the focus groups, even those who appeared to perceive the major national news organizations as highly professional, responsible and trustworthy often implied that the range of views of any given media outlet is necessarily limited. They associated the news media with 'bubbles' to indicate how following a small number of mainstream media outlets narrows the audience's knowledge about issues as well as their worldview. Personally, they felt the need for a broad menu of different media outlets – preferably with some foreign ones included – to avoid being confined in such a media-induced bubble.

In a context of heightened political conflicts and societal cleavages, the idea of news media being a driver of bubbles deals a significant blow to the idea of journalistic neutrality. It is increasingly difficult for journalism and national news organizations to claim to be representing the public as a whole or giving (equal) voice to all political groups and views. Instead, a significant share of audiences seems to be aware that the media privilege certain groups, views and ideological perspectives.

### ***Journalistic performance: manipulation and elite alignment***

The recognition of the media as a major institutional power in society easily translates to suspicions of journalists and media organizations abusing that power to manipulate the public. As an indication of the prevalence of such suspicions, 72 percent of the survey respondents agreed either 'fully' or 'partially' with the statement *'Reporters often colour the news according to their own opinions'*. Again, the Greens voters (55 % agreement) and the Finns Party voters (88 %) formed the two extremes concerning the question, while the proponents of other parties fell somewhere in between. Nevertheless, it appears majorities among even the most liberal audiences tend to believe in the existence of (intentional or unintentional) biases in reporting.

Our interviews generally corroborated the prevalence of this view. Moreover, they also indicated that reservations about journalism often went beyond the idea that reporting would be unintentionally affected by journalists' personal values and attitudes. Rather than giving journalists the benefit of a doubt, many interviewees perceived rather sinister intentions behind reporting:

“They [the media] would have just the right amount of power – if they only were capable of using it. They often use it to raise feelings of anger and the like which, as even studies tell, are best for getting clicks – those that make you angry [...] So, when an article invokes anger in me, or powerful feelings, I always start to doubt: has it been the purpose, to intentionally machinate emotions.” (Male 1, 45–65)

“Yes, you get that contrary... counterreaction.” (Male 2, 45–65)

“That’s the way it goes. The first reaction is oftentimes a bafflement and suspicion that ‘wait a minute, what is the intended purpose behind this...’” (Female, 45–65)

The experiences of being manipulated indicate that the questioning of journalistic neutrality has to do not only with reporters’ political and ideological biases. The problem is also related to how journalists and media organizations position themselves in relation to their publics. In this regard, the feasibility of the neutrality principle is challenged by journalists’ perceived close affiliation with, and dependence on, political elites and commercial interests.

When asked to assess on a scale from 0 to 10 how well the Finnish media performed various societal tasks of journalism, the survey respondents gave the lowest grades for the following three tasks: ‘*Contributing to a sense of togetherness*’ (average: 6,42), ‘*Providing information independently from those in power*’ (6,92), and ‘*Acting as a watchdog of power*’ (7,01). On all those three tasks, the averages had markedly decreased compared to a similar survey conducted on Finnish audiences over a decade ago, which included the same question (see Karppinen et al. 2010). Combined with the fact that one in two survey respondents (51 %) agreed with the statement ‘*The readers, viewers and listeners have too little influence on what the Finnish media reports*’, these findings indicate that there is a relatively widespread concern among Finns that journalists are too close to power and fail to represent their audiences’ voices and interests. The audiences seem to increasingly question whether the journalism actually aligns with the public interest as opposed to their private, or even elite, interests.

## Discussion

This paper has sought to explore how journalism’s professional ideal and practice of impartiality relates to audience trust in journalism in the contemporary highly politicised environment of public debate. As audiences are becoming increasingly politically fragmented and polarised, is impartial journalism losing its viability? Can the principle and practice that underlines the very legitimacy of journalism as an institution (and ideology) become a problem for journalism’s credibility?

Hanitzsch and colleagues (2018) found that there is a strong connection between audience trust in the media and the political environment. Changes and polarisation in the political context tend to be associated with lower levels of trust in the media. For them, the growing repudiation of elites may well explain the erosion of trust in the media.

These observations bring us to the question of what trustworthiness actually means to audiences. One aspect is the reliability of the news reporting, another is the perceived purpose of the organization providing them and the broader role it plays in society. Accordingly, people may generally trust the news produced by professional journalists to be accurate, but they may still have doubts about the personal and organizational goals of journalism. Our findings indicate that the

great majority of Finnish audiences still find the quality news media as reliable in terms of factual reporting – at least when the reported issue is not highly politicised. Yet they may simultaneously harbour suspicions about the mainstream news organizations in terms of abusing their power over audiences, especially in terms of providing narrow ideological horizons and favouring certain groups in society.

These healthy dimensions of critical media literacy may qualify but not necessarily erode people's general trust in journalism. It appears that audience trust in the media fundamentally arises from an emotional connection, a sense that journalism is on 'our side' (Coleman 2012). When audiences experience the worldviews and societal goals of a journalist or specific news organization to align with their own, their trust in that organization, or in journalism more generally, stays strong. It is only when one cannot recognise the world represented by mainstream journalism that one begins to actively distrust it. In this regard, the large majority of Finns who identify with traditional political groups still seem able to find their views represented in the national media. However, the striking divergence of the Finns Party voters from others signals that the mainstream media has lost the capacity to address, and speak for, the feelings, views and values of a significant and potentially growing segment of the population.

Experts often ascribe the popular suspicions about 'the manipulating media' to people's limited understanding of how journalists actually operate. Accordingly, increasing the transparency of journalistic practices is frequently presented by scholars and media professionals alike as a way to increase trust in the news media (e.g., Newman and Fletcher 2017; Flew 2020; Henke et al. 2020). However, this call for more transparency tends to be confined, especially by practitioners, to greater openness about working practices, including the disclosure of sources. Less attention is given to ideological transparency, or to openness about reporters' own biases—which may nevertheless be read between the lines by critical publics.

With the growing nationalist-conservative backlash in most western countries against the liberal institutional order, mainstream journalism has been frequently put on the defensive and forced to explicitly argue in favour of liberal principles, including tolerance, human rights and internationalism. These kinds of openly ideological moves easily alienate part of the audience and generate conflictual relationships between audiences and media organizations. Therefore, insofar as societal and political divides continue to widen in western societies, it is unlikely that the national media can credibly claim to represent all segments of the audience.

In sum, it appears that the image and self-conception of mainstream journalism as being impartial and representing the public as a whole is becoming increasingly difficult to uphold and threatens its credibility and trustworthiness. On the contrary, the awareness of both audiences and reporters themselves may grow concerning the political and ideological connections of journalism and the partial nature of any media organization. If this leads to greater transparency about the purposes of journalism and the values and expectations of its audiences, the weakening of neutrality as a practice and ideal can, somewhat paradoxically, engender greater audience trust in journalism.

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