Leaving it up to professionals (and the market):

Development of online media accountability practices in Finland

Heikki Heikkilä

Leaving it up to professionals (and the market): Development of online media accountability practices in Finland

Heikki Heikkilä

Summary

Transparency and media accountability have gained more prominence in Finland recently with regard to two main factors: Firstly, the news media have become whistle-blowers with regard to a few political scandals over recent years, which have triggered public debate over the power of media and ethical conduct of journalism. Secondly, controversies have risen with regard to the 'ownership' of opinions published on online discussion boards and whether or not these should be submitted to the responsibility of journalists. Even though these themes have captured a lot of public attention, in the context of surveys, the future of journalism and public trust in the news media are not seriously in peril.

While citizens in general do not merely use the media but also tend to discuss the news, their role in shaping media accountability practices on the Internet seems limited. Despite the majority of Finns using the Internet on a daily basis, the volume and prominence of media watch-blogs and also attempts to create participatory forms of journalism online have remained scarce.

In the absence of a 'bottom-up' movement, issues related to media accountability have been taken by traditional institutions of self-regulation: the press council (CMM) and professional organizations supporting the CMM. As a result of their actions, the guidelines of journalists and institutional procedures of the CMM have been updated in order to meet with new challenges. While these attempts tend to draw support from most journalists and citizens in general, there are some signs of differences of opinion about how the Internet is expected to shape journalism and public communication. There is, on the one hand, a strong line of thought that seeks to incorporate online news to the domain of professionalism and self-regulation. On the other hand, the interviews conducted among the Finnish experts signal that the consensus over forms and norms of journalism is not completely harmonious.

Rendering news organizations transparent, and enhancing dialogue between producers and users, is endorsed as a principle but the enactment of such practices is not among the primary priorities for media organizations. Nonetheless, relative optimism prevails in that as online journalism is on its way to redeem its status economically as well culturally, this would enable media organizations to launch new practices, including those related to media accountability. This optimism may not be warranted on the basis that online news practices are developed in a strongly competitive market. In this environment, ethical values such as accountability and trust may appear incompatible with short-term economic goals.

1. Context factors in the development of MA practices

1.1 Media legitimacy and existing MA institutions

According to surveys conducted from the 1980s to the present, the legitimacy of the news media has remained relatively high and stable in Finland. According to recent findings, no less than 87 per cent of respondents say they are satisfied with the quality of journalism (Karppinen et al. 2010: 33). With regard to trust in institutions, the news media are regarded much more positively than the government and political parties. In a recent EVA survey (2009: 36), 59 per cent of respondents say they trust the media, whilst 39 per cent say they trust the government.

Surveys indicate trust in the news media is rather unevenly distributed between specific outlets. Citizens tend to trust television news particularly strongly (*YLE* 95 per cent and *MTV3* 87 per cent, respectively), while newspapers rank slightly lower (*Helsingin Sanomat* 66 per cent). With regard to trustworthiness, popular newspapers stand out as clear exceptions, e.g. *Ilta-Sanomat* 15 per cent and *Iltalehti* 13 per cent (Karppinen & Jääsaari 2007). In the EVA (2009) study, the level of trust seems to vary depending on the media outlet, even though popular newspapers were not evaluated (see Table 1 below).

Table 1: The level of trust in the news media

The media	Percentage
YLE (public service)	67
Regional newspaper published in the area of residence	62
MTV3 (commercial television)	44
Helsingin Sanomat (national daily)	44
News media in general	**59**

Source: EVA 2009

The data in both studies tend to exaggerate the polarization between media outlets. This is partly due to the definition of news being much narrower and more traditional in television news than in daily newspapers, let alone popular newspapers. Thus, the relatively lower level of trust in newspapers is partly due to the wider scope and styles in their output (crime, celebrity news etc.)

In surveys about uses of the Internet, the issue of trust is not regularly addressed. One of the few such studies in this theme (Matikainen 2010), suggests the trust of mainstream online news services is slightly lower than those of offline media outlets (45 per cent), but is clearly higher than the trust in online peer production, wikipedia etc. (13 per cent).

The relatively high legitimacy of the news media coincides with another set of evidence from

the surveys suggesting the power of the media is perceived to be increasing. No less than 81 per cent of respondents note that the power of news media has increased recently (Karppinen et al. 2010), whereas in the EVA (2009) study, 63 per cent agree news media have "too much power". Since the concept of power is not explicitly defined in the questionnaires, or by respondents, this argument needs to be evaluated against two plausible modes of power. On the one hand, it refers to citizens experiencing effects of *mediatization* wherein other social institutions, such as politicians and experts, need to submit themselves to media exposure and adjust to a specific set of rules set by the media environment (Kunelius et al. 2010). In his interview, Arto Nieminen, the chairman of the Union of Journalists confirmed this view:

> The relationship between journalism and decision makers in politics and economy have changed. Journalists have become more aggressive. This is partly due to broader changes within society [lowering status of politics and welfare state - author] but it also results from the increasing [economic and professional - author] competition between media organizations.
> (Arto Nieminen, Union of Journalists).

The power of news media, on the other hand, refers to particular events (situations) wherein journalism tends to have *episodic* power over the situational dynamics of events (Karppinen et al. 2010). The most notable situations have dealt with alleged wrongdoings of politicians or business executives, where the news media have taken a prominent role as whistle-blowers. With regard to such cases, the conduct of journalists have also has been critically scrutinized in public. Against this backdrop, almost two third of survey respondents (60 per cent) agree news media should be regulated more strongly than currently (Karppinen et al. 2010: 47). The questionnaire does not specify what sort of regulation respondents mean but in the Finnish news culture and in the current public debate, the most obvious reference is self-regulation. Thus, the issues framing the debate over media accountability are whether or not news organizations respect their ethical guidelines, and whether or not the institutions designed to reinforce self-regulation are fit to solve the problems at hand.

In the early months of 2010 – after witnessing three resignations of its chairmen within four years – the Council for Mass Media (CMM) initiated a reform process aimed at improving the practices of self-regulation and restoring the status of the Council. Typically for the consensus-seeking practices within the Finnish journalism culture, the process was carried out through public seminars and dialogue with editors. By the end of 2010, these negotiations resulted in revising the Guidelines of Journalists, for instance, with regard to corrections in online publications. Yet, the most notable institutional change was to add a fourth representative of the public to the Council (together with three representatives of both journalists and publishers). An open call for audience representatives produced approximately 750 applications to the CMM, which was interpreted as a sign of public interest in media ethics and legitimacy of self-regulation principles in general.

Experts interviewed in the *MediaAct* project regard these changes positively because these tend to corroborate the public support for self-regulation. Beneath this aura of legitimacy there is, however, a sense of uncertainty, whether the overhaul of the Council will be able to redeem expectations. One of the main areas of concerns is online journalism. Online editor of Aamulehti expressed his doubts as follows:

> It's fine that the Council pursues the credibility of journalism and is willing to campaign for it. Nonetheless, every time the Council comes out to say something about the Internet, I'm a bit puzzled. Their perspective is so deeply entrenched in traditional journalism.
> (Seppo Roth, Aamulehti.)

This tension will be discussed more in detail in connection to the section on professionalism and current trends in online journalism.

1.2 Internet user cultures

The Internet has effectively penetrated into the everyday lives of Finns. More than half of the population, ranging from 56 per cent to 68 per cent depending on the survey, uses it regularly, and 69 per cent of regular users get part of their news diet online. Besides using online services and receiving news, many users (42 per cent) are registered in social networking sites such as Facebook. The ratio of Internet users is the highest among the young generation (see Table 2, below) but also working age people (25-64 years) are widely represented among Internet users (Statistics Finland 2010).

Table 2: Proportion of Internet user with regard to their age groups

The age group	Percentage
16 – 24 years	76
25 – 34 years	78
35 – 44 years	65
45 – 54 years	53
55 – 64 years	43
65 – 74 years	19
Average	56

Source: Statistics Finland 2010

The Internet is used mostly for personal communication and information searches, but regular reading of online news ranks high as well (see, Table 3 below). The number of reading blogs is gradually increasing (40 per cent) and almost one third of users tend to visit online discussion boards. Still, both the number of blogs, and users actively publishing a blog, are disproportionately low: no more than 5 per cent of users say they maintain a blog (Statistics Finland 2009, 2010). Even this figure is regarded empirically questionable by many experts.

Table 3: Purpose of using the Internet (of all Internet users)

	Percentage
Email	91
Online Banking	87
Information search on services and products	86
Online newspapers / magazines	77
Registered in social networking sites*	42
Reading blogs	41
Taking part in discussion groups or newsgroups	33
Creating and maintaining blogs	5

Source: Statistics Finland 2009; *Statistics Finland 2010

When asked why Internet users do not contribute to public communication more actively, Internet researcher and blogger Kari Hintikka notes an underlying paradox:

> In general, the level of media literacy (including skills for peer production) would be good enough for initiating watch-blogs and citizen journalism. Apparently, the quality of public discourse isn't so bad that users would seize the opportunity at least in a big scale. There are some excellent media bloggers on and off but many of them have paced down their postings. This field (blogging on journalism and media) is so small that changes at the level of personal life may make a difference. If they get a new job, for instance [they may tune out].
> (Hintikka, researcher/blogger.)

While Hintikka points out to the limits of *critical mass of producers* that would be able reproduce itself, other interviewees emphasize some specific features of Finnish (political) culture. In line with several studies in audience research, interviewees point out that readers tend to associate credible information with authoritative sources and that journalists are expected do their best in acquiring the most relevant sources available (Karppinen et al. 2010; Heikkilä et al. forthcoming). Against this background, for instance, journalists' attempts to provide ordinary citizens with a more prominent role in news production, either offline or online, tend to trigger negative feedback from some users.

> It's a bit strange that when we ask readers to share their stories or photographs with us, we get e-mails asking us why we do it. "Why don't you just trust your journalists?" They say they don't want regular guys in the news, they want the experts' view! Is it in our culture that we respect professionals so highly that facts need to be validated by institutional sources?
> (Reetta Meriläinen, editor-in-chief, Helsingin Sanomat.)

Given that online peer production in the Internet, anonymous online discussion boards notwithstanding, is akin to public appearances, which is said to be in conflict with the Finns allegedly habitual reluctance to speak out publicly. One interviewee illustrated this with her experiences in witnessing discussions about media ethics in two very different settings, a public seminar and a meeting of the press council.

> I can identify myself with that people may feel embarrassed in talking in public events. I mean, I tend to think a lot how to express myself and probably 90 per cent of others

do the same. In the meetings of the council, on the other hand, the atmosphere is much
safer because it's not public (except the memoranda about the resolutions).
(Nina Porra, secretary CMM.)

Another important factor underlying the user cultures is the lack of explicit political polarization across the media field. This means that neither prominent news media nor many groups formed in the Internet are ideologically organized[1] as, for instance, in the case USA, or some southern European countries (Hallin & Mancini 2004). Thus, the centripetal force of the culture makes it difficult to establish or mobilize Internet-based groups to either support or criticize a particular news medium. In effect, the most popular forms of peer production or user generated content tend to remain distant to journalism or social affairs in general and focus on, for instance, fashion. News organizations often regard this as a setback, as this seems to undermine their attempts to engage themselves with users as potentially active collaborators.

> **Case 1: Hommaforum: A popular movement against liberal immigration policies**
>
> Hommaforum (http://cms.hommaforum.org/) presents itself as popular movement concerned with immigration. The site includes a "newsroom", wherein users aggregate and share news in order to facilitate online comments in the discussion board.
>   A recent posting to the board (March 8. 2011) refers to the nomination of the refugee woman of the year. Within two days, the piece of news generated more than a hundred comments. Part of the comments discusses, whether the news coverage is compatible with the "pro-immigrant bias" that the mainstream news media are often accused of.

1.3 Professional journalism and the development in online news

Professionalism in journalism is traditionally collectively organized. Even though membership in the Union of Journalists is not officially required, more than 90 per cent of those working with news-related jobs (about 16,000) are paid-up members of the union. In addition, all major types of media outlets have their own distinct organizations (national, regional and local newspapers, magazines, radio channels), of which practically all have signed the charter of the CMM and thus committed themselves to the shared principles of self-regulation. This institutional setting aims at cementing the idea that self-regulation is to be defined, maintained and safeguarded in cooperation with journalists, publishers and members of the audience (via representation in the Council and through the right to file complaints).

Even if online journalism represents in many respects a distinct news practice, it has been quite neatly incorporated into the dominant ideas of professionalism. This is very much due to the fact that the field of online journalism is occupied by traditional media organizations i.e. major television networks and leading national and regional newspapers. The number of

---

[1] Note, Case 1: *Hommaforum* is an exception.

genuinely "net-native" online news services in Finland is very limited and very few of them have succeed in consolidating themselves in the news market. The most notable exception is Uusi.Suomi.fi, which has also subscribed to the Charter of the CMM.

Given that self-regulation has played an important role in understanding professionalism in journalism, most of the tensions within the field have been tackled with regard to the Guidelines of Journalists and the conduct of the CMM. Many of the recent debates have been related to online journalism. Some of these have addressed specific practices of journalism, such as how incorrect information is to be corrected, or how original sources of news are to be credited in online news (a response to so called copy-paste journalism). While these two problems seem to be rather straightforward to solve, more controversies have related to the "ownership" of online discussion boards managed by media organizations.

> **Case 2: The ownership of online discussion boards: the responsibilities of newsroom moderation**
>
> In November 2010, the press council (CMM) upheld two complaints against major News organizations of publishing controversial postings in online discussion boards; one hosted by *Helsingin Sanomat* (pre-publication moderated) and the other by *Iltalehti* (post-publication moderated).
>
> In the case of *Helsingin Sanomat*, breaking news was posted to the online discussion board managed by the paper, reporting that the main figure of the Finnish documentary film *Reindeerspotting – Escape from Santaland* had died in Cambodia. The awarded film describes the lifestyles of young drug addicts living in the Northern Finland and it had triggered a lively public discussion earlier that year.
>
> One of postings published in the discussion board included a link to the photograph, originally published in Cambodia *Times,* portraying the corpse and explicitly demonstrating that the death was self-inflicted. After realizing that the link and one controversial user comment referring to the case had passed the moderation process, the online desk removed them from the discussion board and publicly apologized for its error. This did not prevent relatives of the deceased from submitting a complaint to the CMM. In the meantime, the same hyperlink to the photograph was reintroduced to another discussion board, Suomi24.fi (not moderated).
>
> The CMM upheld the complaint against *Helsingin Sanomat* and called for more specific rules of conduct for pre-publication moderation in media-managed online discussion boards. These rules were due to be completed by the end of 2010 but due to lack of consensus, the deadline for the proposal draft was extended to spring 2011.

The decision of the CMM in regard to the case described above suggests that the editorial responsibility covers not merely news content but also online comments and discussions managed by news organizations. This conclusion triggered sharp criticism from journalists.

> Our staff moderates online discussions from 7 a.m. to midnight. They have about seventeen seconds to judge whether or not a given posting is fit to publish. You know, we invest a great deal of human resources for moderation. Then we make one mistake and sometimes mistakes do happen. In spite of the fact that we did everything to correct it as soon as possible, we were adjudicated by the press council. It's so unfair! I find it scary, if this is what the CMM is after.
> (Paula Salovaara, online editor, Helsingin Sanomat.)

Also, the interviewees from the CMM and Union of Journalists agree that the strict policy invokes criticism particularly from news organizations. In their view, a majority of professionals – most notably editors-in-chief – have clearly endorsed strengthening the responsibility of moderators at sites maintained by the news media, even if this adds to the workload of online newsrooms.

Another incentive for discussing self-regulation in online journalism is opened by practices aimed at maximizing the number of visitors (or clicks) in online news services, which is perceived by some commentators as a leap towards more excessive commercialism in the news production (Vujnovic et al. 2010). In the economically and professionally driven competition, a high density of Internet traffic marks an engagement of users to a particular online news service and helping that media organization to assume a better hold of advertising revenues. This objective has already invoked a set of story formats distinctive to online news services that generate some criticism. One of format consists of the so called "teasers" that conceal the most important information of the news items from their headlines and photographs. If users want to learn more about a news story titled, for example, as "A prominent film star dies", or "See the provocative pictures!" they have to click the story, and while doing so they will be counted as users of that particular news story.

While this practice may not appeal to most journalists and users– and many of our experts agree with them – measuring clicks gains in importance as these are regarded as hard evidence of what users actually read in the Internet. In a way, the analysis of Internet traffic renders users transparent to producers and not vice versa. Some of our interviewees emphasize that if the information about users is analyzed carefully it will help online news organizations to respond to the interests of users. In this way, some of the experts are confident that it helps in improving online journalism.

> In the old days, it was possible to justify whatever news item as if it were in the interest of readers. Now we can see from the figures that it isn't necessarily true. [The evidence of the Internet traffic may tell you that] there is no-one reading your story! Surely, being aware of this has an effect on how newsrooms work. In one news organization the effect is more direct and immediate than in others.
> (Seppo Roth, Aamulehti.)

Online news practices develop quickly and flexibly. One expert noted that the ways she described the environment in the interview may no longer be valid two months later. In the interviews the experts described the future of online journalism in a rather positive light. Particularly those having an extensive working history with the Internet assume that the status of online news is

getting stronger inside and outside media organizations. The former is regarded to be crucial in order to assure economic and human resources for developing and innovating practices. Those maintaining a more critical stance towards the current development – most notably represented by the experts on self-regulation – appear to be optimistic in that professional judgment would gradually overrule the risk of commercial excesses.

> The Internet has changed things quite radically in a short period of time, but I assume that the things are cooling off a bit. Journalists are no longer in panic because they see that professional journalism will be still needed for. Publishers keep looking ways to make it profitable and they will find the way eventually. In economic terms, boosting Internet traffic may work in the Anglo-Saxon countries but probably not in Finland.
> (Juha Rekola, Union of Journalists.)

Whether this attitude denotes calm realism or a certain centripetal cultural drive customary to Finnish journalism political culture, there seems to be underlying tensions between two brands of professionals. Those more tuned to the "traditional" view, emphasize that online journalism should be somehow integrated into the predominant framework of self-regulation, or otherwise it may run the risk of becoming less trustworthy and credible. In the opposite view, it is argued that the logical order may be the other way round. It may be that online journalism paves the way for the gradual change of offline journalism. This view lends support to the fact that media organizations no longer perceive online journalism as a site constantly experimenting and producing second-rate quality compared to offline media. While this change of attitude has not resulted in major investments in online news production as yet – and it may never will – this option is nonetheless taken positively, particularly by online editors.

Whether this optimism will or will not be accounted for, in the meantime, on-line editors are more willing than the "traditionalists" to accept online news as a different species of journalism: a bit wilder and commercially-driven than mainstream offline journalism, perhaps.

2. Practices initiated by the media

2.1 Actor transparency [2]

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. In online news output, transparency of an individual journalist is generally dealt with by providing online news stories with *bylines*, often coupled with a photo, and occasionally profiles of individual journalists. Journalists may also maintain personal blogs either associated with the

---

[2] The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

media organization they work for, or independent from it, in order to provide "a human face" for their work. In the Finnish news environment, blogs are not very actively utilized by journalists in either setting. In practical terms, our experts explain that journalist blogs used to be a small-scale fad about ten years ago as many professionals wanted to experiment with the new publishing tool. More recently, many of them have stopped maintaining their blogs as the lure of having a blog started to fade and it was replaced by other duties and interests.

In addition, the choice of not investing in actor transparency seems to in line with a culturally held assumption of professionalism wherein transparency of an individual journalist is easily associated with self-promotion. This viewpoint makes sense, if we take into account that professionalism in journalism is collectively rather than individually defined within the Finnish news culture. It is not individual journalists that count but the more faceless craftsmanship they represent. This may explain why new means of rendering journalists more transparent are neither very actively introduced nor experimented with.

Table 4: Practices fostering actor transparency in Finnish online news websites

Practices	Availability at online news websites
Bylines	Yes
Profiles of Journalists	Few
Journalist blogs	Few
Published mission papers	No
Published Code of Ethics (GJ)	Usually no
News policy document, in-house code of ethics	Usually no
Public information on company ownership	Yes

Given that media organizations emphasize their independence from political parties, *mission papers* that reiterate very broad political principles such as, defending democracy and freedom of speech etc., have an indirect, if not a marginal role for journalists and audiences (Lehto 2006) but are not generally available online. Conversely, public information about *company ownership* is customarily published in the news websites as this is required by the corporate law. This information is often issued in a special section for "corporate information for investors", which is separated from the journalistic content. Documents relating to *newsroom policies* or in-house rules for self-regulation are not usually available online, even if the latter have been increasingly drafted in the newsrooms, partly as a response to new developments in the Internet (see, the case 3 below).

In the interviews, journalists argued that there is no particular reason for not providing in-house rules publicly. A representative of CMM noted that this issue has been discussed with journalists but has, so far, been inconclusive.

> In a visit to a newsroom last fall [2010], we proposed that online platforms may include a drop-down box for journalism ethics. This section could contain the

Guidelines for Journalists, more specific in-house rules, a link to the CMM website and a record of council decisions imposed on the given media organization. (…) We didn't get any explicit response from journalists. So, perhaps we may need to remind them about it.
(Ilkka Vänttinen, secretary CMM.)

Case 3: In-house code of ethics, available and not available online

In the online news-platform of STT a drop-down box titled as the "Style book" describes in great detail the news practices applied in the newsroom. While this information is apparently most useful to the regular staff as well as stringers, it can be helpful to anyone interested in news practices.

In the section designated to ethics and jurisprudence of journalists, STT reiterates the Guidelines for Journalists (GJ), approved by the Union of Journalists and makes some practical amendments to most of the statutes of the GJ. This information is available in Finnish only. See, http://www.stt.fi/fi/tyylikirja/toimittajan_etiikkaa_ja_juridiikkaa7

In November 2010, *Helsingin Sanomat* ran a news story, in which the editor-in-chief explained that the paper had launched a rule of conduct for Facebook for its staff members. The in-house rules are not publicly available in the news websites, but the document and the piece of news reporting on the instructions can be found through the online archives (accessible for paying customers only).

2.2 Production transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. In general, practices pursuing production transparency are not very well advanced within Finnish online news platforms. Links to original sources of information are used rather unsystematically. It is much more common to provide a link to the archives of the particular news medium or to international news websites quoted in the story. This cautiousness is explained by the fact that news organizations do not want to be held responsible for the veracity of information that they have not produced themselves.

Transparency in connection to news judgments tends to be reinforced in cases of exceptional news events, such as the two tragic school shootings that took place in 2007 and 2008, wherein online news organizations were forced to explain their ethical conduct and respond to questions from users. A particularly influential call for responsiveness was voiced by the petition signed by young people who attended, or used to attend one of the schools afflicted by shootings (Raittila et al. 2010). At the level of normalcy, production transparency is not among the first priorities of online editors and developers. One interviewee defended this position by saying that no-one is asking them to be more transparent while others assume that it has more to do with online news organizations not having really thought about how to enhance production transparency.

Also, the limited attention received by previous experiments with newsroom blogs tends to

confirm the lack of enthusiasm. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, the only regularly updated newsroom blog focuses on the relationship between journalism and technology and even this is maintained by former staff member. Instead of having a newsroom blog, *Aamulehti* experimented with publishing a memo of the newsroom conferences, but this beat was cancelled after no more than three entries "because no-one seemed to read it".

Facebook provides another opportunity for production transparency. At the moment, online news organizations tend to use it mainly for promoting their news stories. This practice is less aimed at rendering news production transparent than encouraging Facebook users to share pieces of news with each another and attracting more users to the newspaper website.

> Facebook is becoming more and more important and we are just learning ways of taking advantage of it in sourcing. In addition to jouralistic goals, Facebook is useful in boosting internet traffic to our platform. We have noted that the traffic from Facebook already exceeds the traffic coming from the most popular news aggregation site (www.ampparit.com) in Finland.
> (Paula Salovaara, Helsingin Sanomat.)

A number of interviewees emphasize that enhancing transparency in online production would not be a bad thing: It would not harm anyone. There are different opinions, however, whether or not users would be actually interested in learning more about how news organizations operate. In spite of the relatively high level of media literacy, some interviewees agree that ordinary citizens may have peculiar understandings of daily newswork. The main obstacle for making news practices clearer to users is the uncertainty over what sort of practices might be useful and sustainable.

> In the current circumstances we cannot afford to get ourselves fixed with a particular routine unless we can be sure of its relevance. Without a clear [and assumingly positive] response from users these attempts would simply be futile.
> (Reetta Meriläinen, Helsingin Sanomat.)

While the quote above may be interpreted as an act of legitimation for doing nothing, it should be emphasized that online newsrooms are constantly changing their ways of working: new organizational designs and formats are experimented with, while the resources invested in online journalism have not increased significantly. These restraints – and economic expectations following any reforms – obviously undermine rather than encourage ethically motivated innovations.

Table 5: Practices fostering production transparency in Finnish online news services

Practice	Availability at online news websites
Links to original sources	Not systematically
Newsroom blogs	Limited
Presence in Facebook	Yes
Presence in Twitter	Limited
Collaborative news production	Limited
Citizen journalism, initiated by news media	Experimenting

New online instruments for users to participate in the news production are well-known in Finnish news culture. As a token of this, most media organizations solicit users to send their photographs and videos to online desks. These opportunities tend to result in a sustainable practice in connection to users' eyewitness reports from the scene of events. These contributions tend to be more often photographs than full news stories.

Our experts agreed that the forms of user-generated content (UGC) will and – according to many of them – should go beyond sending photographs through mobile phones. More news-like modes of production, however, tend to develop in smaller steps than would be hoped for. From the perspective of media organizations, the most promising area of developing peer production is hyper local news, which is currently experimented with, for instance, by *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Aamulehti*. The online editor of Aamulehti notes that rendering citizen journalism, as established practice, is not easy to do.

> It's a bit surprising that even in CNN, the active group contributing to "I Report" isn't very big. It works well, though. I haven't seen anything to compare that in Finland or Sweden, not even in the UK. (…) This isn't surprising because it takes a lot more to make news than just expressing your opinions. Having said that, I'm hopeful that hyper local citizen journalism is possible to do. I want to be involved in facilitating it. Yet, it's difficult know quite how to do it.
> (Seppo Roth, Aamulehti.)

The call for hyper local journalism reflects a broader idea about an assumed division of labor – not competition – between news organizations and users. In this design, users are supposed to cover occurrences that fall outside of the radar of professional journalists: car accidents or community events that are seemingly idiosyncratic and less important than events where the professional journalists are supposed to focus. Hyper local news may thus help news organizations to outsource particular functions to volunteer contributors: announcing arts exhibitions and concerts or reviewing them. What makes these attempts more prominent is that independent experiments with citizen journalism tend to be scarce and short-lived. A rather widely recognized recent example is *Topiikki.fi*, which was, after less than one year of existence, withdrawn to "winter vacation". Also, our interviewees would anticipate this development positively.

> User-generated content is often promoted as something revolutionary, but people will not become producers, if they don't see it a relevant thing to do. I'm sure that relevant causes will be found gradually and this would foster such practices. This will come in due course while people think about it.
> (Juha Rekola, Journalistiliitto.)

Case 4: Collaborative news production: Nettikampa (Internet Comb) at Aamulehti

The regional newspaper Aamulehti enables Internet users to register in the pool of "citizen journalists" who are expected to assist the newsroom and readers to locate relevant sources of news in the Internet. Collaborators of the Net Comb are encouraged to post their findings to the online paper and provide it with a brief account and hyper link to the original source. Selections of these contributions are published in the print version as well.

At the moment, the Net Comb pool comprises about 30 contributors, of which about half are staff members and the other half are journalism students or citizen journalists. See http://www.aamulehti.fi/cs/Satellite/Nettikampa

2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. With regard to errors in news, online newsrooms tend to have a practical, "less-than-holy" attitude. In the world without deadlines, editorial judgment takes place in a tight time margin, and errors of judgment admittedly happen. In 2010, CMM passed a resolution that called for improvement of making corrections quickly and more systematically. The online editors interviewed in this study assured that, in their daily practices, corrections are not problematic at all. Errors will be corrected spontaneously at the news desk or when someone sends a notice through a news comment, online feedback form or by telephone. It is customary that desk editors send an e-mail to those who notify of errors appreciating their contribution.

Correction buttons are not available in any online news service in Finland at the moment. In the interviews it appeared that this practice was not known to them but when informed of them some interviewees started to think positively about the idea of having correction buttons. One obvious benefit would be to reduce the risk that incorrect information is archived and redistributed.

In the face of their practical experiences, journalists tend to think that going further in discussing

errors in public appears to be counter-productive. Seppo Roth, the online editor at Aamulehti provided a poignant example of this:

> Roth: We ran a news story about that the bars in the main street sell beer on discount. The story singled out one particular bar where you would get a pint with two euros. Without any further a due, we received [online] comments asking, whether this were a paid advertisement and asking how much the paper earned from it. We published the comments, of course.
> Interviewer: Did you respond to those publicly?
> Roth: No, we didn't because it should be obvious that we don't run stories that way. Had I explained this, it would have been ridiculous [and not convincing to those who would not believe reassurances of journalists' integrity].

In online platforms, possibilities for submitting newsrooms with ideas are more easily available than before. Both of the online editors we interviewed note that readers use these opportunities but useful tip-offs tend to be mixed with general user feedback and their particular opinions about the matter at hand.

> We get a lot feedback from users, but not very much of that can be elaborated for news. It's more about their opinions about the day's paper. We also ask more specific contributions from our users and these can be very productive. Anyways, there isn't any clear rationale for dealing with the tip-offs. Sometimes we use them a lot and sometimes not at all.
> (Paula Salovaara, Helsingin Sanomat.)

Table 6: Online practices fostering responsiveness in the Finnish online news services

Practice	*Availability at online news websites*
Feedback form and tip-offs	Yes
Correction buttons	No
Online news comments	Yes
Audience blogs	Yes

Online comments in news is a widely-spread practice that produces ample opinions to be shared by users. Due to its vastness and lack of coordination, online news comments yield ambiguous interpretations from the experts. On the one hand, online comments are perceived as online extensions to letter-to-the-editor sections and, on top of that, facilitating exchange of views among interested users. On the other hand, it is acknowledged that the discourse of online comments tends to be coarse and sometimes even uncivil. This is probably one reason why professional journalists rarely join online discussions after their coverage.

> I visit online discussions quite often. And every now then I try to respond to the criticism but I very rarely get the feeling that my points would come across. At the beginning, I sometimes took this personally but now I've learnt to think that no matter how relentless the criticism is, at any case, it shows that the newspaper is important for them.
> (Reetta Meriläinen, Helsingin Sanomat.)

In addition to online comments to news, Internet users have the opportunity to express their opinions in audience blogs facilitated by a number of media organizations. Audience blogs are a growing phenomenon in some online platforms (such as *Uusi Suomi* and *Aamulehti*). Based on the tags used in the audience blogs, many contributors focus on social commentary, which is often media-related (Heikkilä & Kylmälä 2011). Some others, for instance, *YLE* and *Helsingin Sanomat* are not very active in facilitating audience blogs.

> If people want to publish their views through blogs there are a plenty of platforms available for doing this already. What we could do instead in YLE is to pay more attention to the blogs and draw links to them. A regional newsroom in the Turku region does this more systematically than others.
> We have acknowledged that this practice would be worth of expanding but it still takes some effort to transform it into action. I'm confident in that it will happen insofar as the professionals learn what the users can really offer for them.
> (Tuija Aalto, development manager YLE.)

3. Practices initiated outside the media

Media accountability practices emerging from outside media organizations refer to initiatives to review and criticize journalism in online platforms that are not facilitated by news organizations or commercial service providers. In addition, these initiatives are enacted by individuals other than journalists, albeit the dividing line of who is a journalist may be difficult to draw. Thus, a

comment sent to an online discussion board does not qualify here as a practice initiated outside the media, unlike a citizen media blog, which does qualify.

As noted in the section 1, Internet user culture in Finland is heavily reliant on receiving information (news and entertainment) on the one hand, and engagement in social networking sites on the other. In the meantime, the status of media watch-blogs or organized movements monitoring the media is very limited. The low level of interest of bloggers to media accountability stems from the fact that blogs in general have lacked social and political relevance for many years. This means that, not merely with regard to media criticism but also to the more general political debate, a fruitful cross-fertilization between the blogosphere and the news media has not developed.

The interviewees note that some five to ten years ago, many Internet users – journalists and others – experimented with blogging in their leisure time. Similar to journalists, many bloggers without a professional background in journalism have stopped updating their blogs and very few recruits have emerged to take their place. For some of them, the practice of blogging may have continued but the interest no longer lies in journalism or the "old media", says one of our interviewees.

> Not very many blogs focus on the mass media or journalism. Some of them do of course, like *Merkintöjä mediasta*[3] [*Entries on the Media*]. Many others prefer dealing with the social and cultural impact of the Internet [not journalism]. Instead of blogs, some media critics tend to use youtube. Parody seems to be an important form of media criticism.
> (Kari Hintikka, Internet researcher/blogger.)

Table 7

Practice	Available online
Media (watch)blogs	Few
Youtube	Few
News reviews in wikipedia	Few

According to its own records, the Finnish edition of Wikipedia included more than 260,000 entries in 2009. One of the categories is the so called 'news analysis' that provides an overview of cases that have generated media criticism. As a public record these analyses are, however, very unsystematic. Also, media criticism through YouTube tends to lack established features; a permanent and identifiable production team or even a distinguishable style of presentation.

---

[3] http://outi.posterous.com/

> **Case 5: News parody on the Internet**
>
> A well-known example of news parody as a form of media criticism is *Lehti* (*The Paper*). The website provides mock versions of online news, television news reports and weekly magazines.
>   These media products represent a noncommercial and small-scale version of the US role models, such as *The Onion* or The *Daily Show*. Due to its low public profile, for instance, the mock TV news video clips have gathered no more than 2,500 viewers on average.
> See, http://lehti.lehti.fi

While blogs, video uploads and news reviews on Wikipedia have a limited role as online media accountability practices, a few successful cases have emerged in the social media, wherein the initiatives for holding the media accountable have derived from outside media organizations. According to our interviewees, this social organization through Facebook represents a paradigmatic case of a new type of viewpoint on media accountability. The obvious point of reference here is the unmasking of Lordi, the winner of the Eurovision song contest, in the cover of the Magazine *7 Päivää* in 2006, which resulted in a public apology from the magazine. A more topical example is the Facebook protest against the columnist Kaarina Hazard in 2010 (see, case 6 below). The editor-in-chief of Helsingin Sanomat finds a plausible cultural pattern in both cases.

> There was a strong moral aspect in both cases that struck people very deeply: a reverence for the deceased or the privacy of a national hero. And in both cases it was the news media that were deemed immoral. You could say that these events were possible just because Facebook makes it so easy to say that you like or dislike something. I think there was something more to it.
> (Reetta Meriläinen, Helsingin Sanomat.)

> **Case 6: Facebook protests against the columnist of Iltalehti**
>
> In January 2010, the media columnist Kaarina Hazard described the recently deceased former member of the parliament and ex show wrestler, Tony Halme, in a critical light. This column was regarded derogatory by some readers, who by initiative of the host of a reality TV show established a group in the Facebook to insist on *Iltalehti* sacking Hazard. This act of mobilization, in turn, triggered establishing a few Facebook groups to support Hazard and public pleas opposing her sacking.
>   The news media immediately recognized the emergence of these political groups and subsequently affixed media attention on the case for some time. The public debate followed Hazard's public apology and the paper's decision not to sack her.
>   The public exposure of the case resulted in a large number of complaints about Hazard to the CMM, which subsequently upheld the complaint.

Not all media boycotts mobilized in Facebook are equally morally-loaded. In October 2010, YLE fired a news anchor who was caught mimicking the act of beer drinking during a newscast in English. This decision resulted in establishing a Facebook group with 54,000 supporters to object to the sacking of the news anchor but not surprisingly this had no effect on YLE. Given

that Facebook boycotts emerge on and off, it seems plausible to think that they represent a distinct media accountability practice that is made possible by the Internet.

4. Conclusion

The online environment of news tends to provide both problems and solutions to media accountability practices. Problems point, first, to ways news organizations deal with their own actions: How can they make sound judgments in tight time margins and not get carried away with the competition with other news producers? The big issue within the profession is, whether journalists' conduct should be informed by conventional norms of self-regulation, or whether there is a need for conceiving distinct rules for online news.

Secondly, problems related to media accountability refer to the responsibility of Internet users, and particularly, of those who wish to contribute to public communication through online comments. At least from the perspective of experts of media ethics and journalists, Internet users are a bigger problem and calls for a "professional solution". Yet, it seems that a consensus over what this professional solution may entail is probably not easily reached.

The fact that Internet users are not very enthusiastically involved in the processes of holding news media accountable, suggests that the initiative for conceiving new media accountability practices online tends to fall into the hands of media professionals. At the moment, news organizations are not very active in experimenting with rendering themselves more transparent and responsive. In comparison to some bigger news markets, for instance, UK, Germany and the Netherlands, many instruments for media accountability – such as correction buttons or newsrooms blogs – are sparsely, if at all, implemented. This seems a bit striking given that the Finnish media organizations often like to see themselves at the cutting edge of development.

Two explanations can be drawn for why media accountability is not a top priority for media organizations in Finland. On the one hand, journalists may claim that news organizations are already sufficiently transparent and accountable. This argument draws support from the fairly high level of readership and legitimacy of journalism. Why fix something that is not broken? On the other hand, in the current circumstances, news production generally – and particularly in the online environment – is heavily competitive. From this, it follows that news organizations aim at renewing their designs and practices quite constantly. Most of these reforms are instructed by short-term economic goals. In this framework, practices informed by long-standing ethical goals, such as public trust, may seem too distant or volatile.

Sources

Experts:

Nine experts were interviewed between October and December 2010. All interviews (except that of Kari Hintikka) were taped and transcribed before the analysis. The interviewees are listed below.

Aalto, Tuija: YLE

Hintikka Kari: University of Jyväskylä (through e-mail)

Meriläinen, Reetta, Helsingin Sanomat

Nieminen, Arto: Union of Journalists

Porra, Nina: Council for Mass Media

Rekola, Juha: Union of Journalists

Roth, Seppo: Aamulehti

Salovaara, Paula: Helsingin Sanomat

Vänttinen, Ilkka: Council for Mass Media

Literature:

Domingo, David & Thorten Quandt & Ari Heinonen & Steve Paulussen & Jane B. Singer & Marina Vujnovic (2008). Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and beyond: An international comparative study of initatives in online newspapers. *Journalism Practice* 2, 3, pp. 326–341.

EVA [Finnish Business and Policy Forum] (2009). *Kapitalismi kansankäräjillä*. [Opinions of Finns in the Midst of Economic Crisis. Helsinki: EVA.

Hallin, Daniel & Paolo Mancini (2004). *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Heikkilä, Heikki & Laura Ahva & Hanna Autio & Jaana Siljamäki & Sanna Valtonen (2011, forthcoming). Syytä huoleen: Sosiaaliset verkostot median ja maailman tulkitsijoina. [A Cause for Concern: Social Networks Interpreting the Media and the World]. In: Kangaspunta Seppo (ed.) *Yksilöllinen yhteisöllisyys*. [Individual Communities]. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Heikkilä, Heikki & Timo P. Kylmälä (2011). Finland: Direction of change still pending. In: Eberwein, Tobias & Susanne Fengler & Epp Lauk & Tanja Leppik-Bork (eds.) (2011). *Mapping Media Accountability – in Europe and beyond*. Cologne: Herbert von Halem Verlag.

Karppinen, Kari & Johanna Jääsaari (2007). *Suomalaisten käsityksiä mediasta ja vallasta: Raportti kyselytutkimuksesta*. [Finnish Opinions on Media and Power: A Survey Report]. University of Helsinki: Swedish School of Social Science.

Karppinen, Kari & Johanna Jääsaari & Ullamaija Kivikuru (2010). *Media ja valta kansalaisten silmin*. [Media and Power from the Citizens' Perspective. University of Helsinki: Swedish School of Social Science.

Kunelius, Risto & Elina Noppari & Esa Reunanen (2010*). Media vallan verkoissa*. [Media in the Net of Power]. Tampere: Tampere University Press.

Lehto, Keijo (2006). *Aatteista arkeen: Suomalaisten seitsenpäiväisten sanomalehtien*

linjapapereiden synty ja muutos 1971–2005. [From Ideologies to Everyday Life: The Emergence and Development of News Policies in the Finnish Daily Newspapers]. Jyväskylä: Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities.

Matikainen Janne (2010). Perinteinen ja sosiaalinen media - Käyttö ja luottamus. [Mainstream and Social Media: Uses and Trust.] *Media & viestintä* 33, 2, pp. 55-70.

Vujnovic, Marina & Jane Singer & Steve Paulussen & Ari Heinonen & Zvi Reich & Thorsten Quandt & Alfred Hermida & David Domingo (2010). Exploring the Political-Economic Factors of Participatory Journalism: Views of Online Journalists in 10 Countries. *Journalism Practice* 4, 3, pp. 285–296.

The author:

Heikki Heikkilä, PhD, senior research fellow at the Journalism Research and Development Centre, University of Tampere. Research interests: journalism cultures, public journalism, citizen journalism, audience research, theories of citizenship and public sphere. E-mail: heikki.heikkila@uta.fi