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ARTICLE



## Pioneers as Peers: How Entrepreneurial Journalists Imagine the Futures of Journalism

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### ABSTRACT

The article investigates the futures of journalism that pioneering entrepreneurial journalists anticipate. This comprises the different imaginaries that journalists employ to make sense of journalism's present potentials, anticipate its possible futures, and inform their decision-making. By analysing semi-structured interviews with Finnish entrepreneurial journalists, the article identifies a peer-to-peer imaginary on which the interviewees draw and construct to anticipate the potential futures of journalism. In this peer-to-peer imaginary, journalism is produced in journalists' and audiences' peer networks of affinity and shared interests. The imaginary promises elevated audience engagement and increased income from audience members. It also emphasises journalistic work that is often seen as ideal: autonomous, multi-skilled, self-expressive and non-routine. Despite these potentially preferred outcomes, the imaginary risks distancing journalism from its public roles and embracing more individualised and market-oriented approaches. The peer-to-peer imaginary can shape a journalism that is increasingly elitist by orienting it towards serving paying audiences, contributing to the fragmentation of public discussion by its focus on niche interests and playing into the power interests of global social media platforms that govern much of the digital media infrastructure. The imaginary, thus, mirrors the prevailing contemporary tendency to employ emancipatory visions of digital technologies for commercial objectives.

### KEYWORDS

Anticipation; entrepreneurial journalism; futures of journalism; peer-to-peer; pioneer journalists; social imaginaries; social media

## Introduction

The possible futures of journalism are often explored by studying entrepreneurial news outlets, such as *Krautreporter* in Germany, *Mediapart* in France, or *Politico* in the United States (Deuze and Witschge 2020; Heft and Dogruel 2019). Entrepreneurial journalists tend to be assigned as representatives of the future in the present because many of them are among the first to adopt and experiment with new journalistic

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ideas and practices (Hang and Weezel 2007). Entrepreneurial journalists offer insight into what is emerging in journalism and what might become widely adopted in professional journalism in the future (Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi 2021). Thus, entrepreneurial journalists are a subgroup of *pioneer journalists* who experiment with new journalistic ideas, forms, technologies, practices and organisational models (Hepp and Loosen 2021).

While previous studies have focused on the new practices and norms of entrepreneurial pioneer journalists, this article focuses on how they imagine the futures of journalism. Entrepreneurial pioneers nurture imaginations of the future to orientate their present journalistic practice (Hepp and Loosen 2021). In so doing, they produce futures knowledge; that is, they anticipate future possibilities that are based on present empirical observations and that inform decision-making in the present (Adam and Groves 2007; Pouru, Dufva, and Niinisalo 2019). The potential changes in journalism that pioneers imagine can redefine and reorientate the journalistic field and can also influence legacy media's adaptation in the transforming media environment (Deuze and Witschge 2020).

Futures knowledge pertains to the study of time and temporality in journalism (Barnhurst and Nightingale 2018; Tenenboim-Weinblatt and Neiger 2018). Previous studies have mostly addressed different time perspectives in journalistic content (e.g., Neiger 2007), but there is only scant research on how journalists or journalism experts imagine futures (Creech and Nadler 2018; Keinert, Dogruel, and Heft 2019; Kumpu 2016; Lowrey and Shan 2018). In the name of "temporal reflexivity" (Carlson and Lewis 2019), it is crucial to make the futures discourses of journalism explicit and critically reflect on them (Fuller 2017). In this article, journalists' futures knowledge is conceptualised as *imaginaries of the future* (Cantó-Milà and Seebach 2015)—extensions of broader *social imaginaries* through which individuals and communities imagine and interpret their social existence (Taylor 2004). Imaginaries of the future are embedded in existing meanings, material conditions and power relations. The ways that journalistic entrepreneurs and other pioneer journalists imagine and re-create journalism are likewise anchored in the present social, material and cultural realities. Thus, two research questions were formulated for this study:

RQ1. What kind of shared imaginary of the future do entrepreneurial pioneer journalists draw on when they anticipate the futures of journalism?

RQ2. How does the imaginary reflect the cultural, economic and technological conditions of contemporary journalism?

The study employed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) to identify conceptual categories in data from semi-structured interviews with Finnish entrepreneurial journalists. The analysis reveals *audience* as the core category through which the interviewed journalists make sense of the futures of journalism. They conceive of audience members as active and networked news users whose specialised information needs journalists to respond to. A comparison of the audience category with existing research (Richardson and Kramer 2006) reveals that its contents and logics follow a general *peer-to-peer imaginary* in which society at large is organised on non-hierarchical networks and peer production (e.g., Benkler 2006). By selecting the elements from each conceptual category identified in the data (Strauss and Corbin

1990) that manifest the general peer-to-peer imaginary, the article constructs and examines an adaptation of the general peer-to-peer futures imaginary as described by the studied journalists. Contextualised in the present, the imaginary appears, first and foremost, as a pragmatic strategy to adapt to a media ecology centred around audiences, social media platforms, and self-expressive journalistic work.

## Imaginaries as Futures Knowledge

Different kinds of futures knowledge, such as alternative scenarios, have become central in many news organisations' decision-making as they navigate their complexly interconnected and swiftly changing environment (Pouru, Dufva, and Niinisalo 2019). At the level of journalistic practice, futures knowledge informs journalists' everyday orientation and decisions and influences what kinds of news they produce (see Groves 2017). As the future of journalism remains uncertain, different discourses of its futures take shape and seek to "colonise" these futures with particular expectations and interests (Groves 2017; Zelizer 2015).

The production of futures knowledge draws on *imaginaries of the future*: social and affective imaginations of possible futures that motivate action towards collectively desired futures (Cantó-Milà and Seebach 2015). Imaginaries of the future are expressions of broader *social imaginaries*—that is, the ways in which people imagine their social existence through collectively held beliefs, norms, ideas, ideals, symbols and practices (Taylor 2004). Social imaginaries constitute the largely implicit and unconscious background of the social reality that exists independent of individual consciousness, makes the experience and observations of the surrounding world intelligible and meaningful, enables common practices and allows a widely shared sense of legitimacy and meaning (Taylor 2004; Vanheeswijck 2017). The concept originates from Durkheim's "collective representations" (Gilleard 2018) and the transcendental categories of Kant's phenomenology reinterpreted as historical, cultural and temporal rather than universal and inherent (Vanheeswijck 2017).

Imaginaries underline the creative, *imaginary* aspects of meaning-making. An affective and partly pre-conceptual imagination can reach beyond established meanings and transcend the here and now (Binder 2019). Imaginaries mediate the present and the future by describing and envisaging something that already exists as a latent embryo that can actualise and bloom in the future (Taylor 2004). Social and technological transformations are often first imagined and practised by pioneers before becoming widely acknowledged and institutionally established (Beckert 2013). Entrepreneurial pioneer journalists are essential (re)producers of futures imaginaries in journalism. As they seek new business opportunities, entrepreneurs actively identify and seize new potentials in journalism and, in so doing, draw on and articulate imaginaries of the future (Beckert 2013; Fuller 2017).

The ideas, imaginations, and practices of entrepreneurial pioneer journalists manifest the broader imaginaries of journalism's development. That is, pioneers open up and make explicit potential trajectories of change in journalism (Hepp and Loosen 2021). Rather than a linear diffusion of innovations from pioneers at the "fringes" of journalism to its alleged centres in the legacy media, transformations in journalism are

multi-layered, recursive processes of sense-making and practice that involve legacy media organisations, start-ups and individual pioneers, among other actors outside journalism proper (Deuze and Witschge 2020; Hepp and Loosen 2021). These transformations are shaped by the actors' shared "imaginaries of new possibilities" that orientate present journalistic practices and can inspire and legitimise new ones (Hepp and Loosen 2021, p. 5).

Imaginaries pertain to power as they restrict which kinds of futures for journalism people can imagine and what they can reasonably expect (Ananny and Finn 2020). Imaginaries frame the ways in which journalism and its purposes, boundaries and potentials are conceived (Carlson 2016; Karhunmaa 2019). Imaginaries make temporal change normative: the different interests, values and purposes of journalism embedded in its imaginaries shape what imagined changes are pursued and seen as legitimate, possible and plausible (Carlson and Lewis 2019; Karhunmaa 2019). While imaginaries can be subversive, they often reflect dominant thought and can, thus, narrow down rather than open up the spectrum of possible futures (Marcuse 1964/1991). Imaginaries can seek to "tame" the radical and unpredictable forces that challenge established expectations and discourses of the future (Ananny and Finn 2020; Groves 2017). In this vein, Zelizer (2018) argues how the taken-for-granted conceptions of "the Anglo-American imaginary in news" hinder journalists from reassessing their profession in the face of their transforming political, technological and social environments. The Anglo-American news imaginary can, for example, lead journalists to narrowly reflect elite consensus and conflict rather than the full diversity of publics (Zelizer 2018). At the level of everyday journalistic practices, imaginaries wield power by creating the conceptual and affective preconditions for realising these practices (Baym 2019).

Many contemporary imaginaries in the news industry are techno-utopian, data-driven, innovation-centred and market-oriented (Creech and Nadler 2018). They seek to colonise futures with promises of a new era of productivity, competitiveness and growth (Bina, Inch, and Pereira 2020; Posetti 2018). While such imaginaries exert power in the news industry's innovation processes, they also have a more mundane role in how journalists deploy new technologies and establish related routines. An evolving routine of fact-checking, for instance, involves a professional imaginary that determines what will be fact-checked in the first place, restrains journalists in responding to the results of fact-checking, excludes crowdsourcing and cooperation with audiences, and assumes that fact-checking actually curbs the spread of misinformation (Ananny and Finn 2020). These imaginaries reflect a recurring dynamic where originally radical and utopian ideas about digital technologies become reframed to fit existing practices and relations of power (Lesage and Rinfret 2015).

### Peer-to-Peer Imaginary as an Origin Story of the Internet

An imaginary of peer-to-peer has been the "utopian orthodoxy" (Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011, p. 243) of internet culture since its very beginning in the late 1960s (Castells 2001). In ideal peer-to-peer networks, voluntary and intrinsically motivated individuals collaborate on non-hierarchical projects by both using and contributing

shared material and immaterial resources, the Commons and users' collective intelligence (Aitamurto 2014; Bauwens 2005). Wikipedia editing, open-source programming, crowdsourcing and the open data movement are some of the real-world manifestations of the peer-to-peer imaginary (Aitamurto 2014; Baack 2015).

In journalism studies, peer-to-peer has been used as a synonym for citizen or participatory journalism (Witt 2006). These conceptions are somewhat misleading, as they use "peer" to refer to audience members and exclude journalists. Understood more broadly, peer-to-peer journalism incorporates comprehensive normative goals for journalism in the digital era. Thus, peer-to-peer imaginaries promise a sense of autonomy, belonging, meaning and purpose for both journalists and audience members (Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011). Working collaboratively on self-selected projects can be intrinsically fulfilling for a journalist (Harte, Turner, and Williams 2016). For audience members, consuming and contributing to journalism that reflects their particular information needs, cultural tastes and preferences can help them connect with the news on a personal level and, thus, foster their sense of meaning in news (Benkler 2006).

As journalism becomes increasingly reliant on intimate and sustained reciprocal relationships between journalists and audience members, a growth model mimicking, utilising and exploiting peer-to-peer relationships can spread to journalism at large (Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020). However, the expectation of emancipated grassroots in peer networks has been questioned owing to social inequalities and the current political economy in which commercial actors exploit users' and workers' collective intelligence. Citizens' self-expression and the data produced through their social relationships are being harvested and deployed by social media companies for private interests (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Zuboff 2019). Through the capture and analysis of peer-to-peer communications, commercial actors gain direct access to users' needs, tastes, ideas and identities (Malmelin and Villi 2016; Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). Moreover, networked peer production of news can undermine public-interest reporting and make news increasingly an elite resource (Starkman 2011).

## Data and Method

The data in this study were gathered from semi-structured interviews with 11 representatives from eight Finnish entrepreneurial journalism outlets (Table 1). Although imaginaries are imaginative by definition, they can be articulated in discourse. By analysing the shared views and themes identified in the transcribed interviews, the authors constructed an imaginary that captures the key elements in the participating journalists' anticipations of the futures of journalism. The interviews were conducted in the summer and autumn of 2018, except for one in April 2019 due to the interviewee's medical leave. Seven interviewees self-identified as female and four as male. Their median age was 38, the youngest being 28 years old and the oldest 55 years old. All interviewees but one were either a founder of their start-up or occupied a leadership position. Seven had their main background in journalism and four in arts and design, marketing or communications. Four of those who had their main background in journalism also had experience in entrepreneurship, politics, communications, or activism.

**Table 1.** The participant outlets and their representatives.

| Outlet  | Product  | Business model   | Interviewees' age, gender, position, and occupational background   | Size   |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| <i>Kuka</i> ("Who" in Finnish)                  | A platform for connecting journalists with sources                                       | Licensing fees for expert organisations  | 32, female, partner, arts & design<br>31, male, partner, marketing   | Two partners   |
| <i>Long Play</i>                                | Long-form journalism   | Subscriptions and single payments  | 38, female, editor-in-chief, activism and journalism   | Five full-time employees and approximately 30 regular freelance contributors |
| <i>Mustread</i>                                 | Political news   | Subscriptions and native advertising; free for approximately 1,000 members of the Finnish political and administrative elite | 55, female, partner, journalism and entrepreneurship<br>41, female, editor-in-chief, journalism and politics | 11 journalists, partners and managers  |
| <i>Rapport</i>                                  | A journalism crowdfunding and publishing platform  | Commissions from crowdfunding  | 33, male, CEO, communications and student organisations  | Two founders, a CEO and a producer   |
| <i>Readom</i>                                   | News aggregator and mobile publishing service for media organisations (work-in-progress) | Subscriptions and customer fees  | 41, male, CEO, journalism  | Six partners   |
| <i>Ruskeat tytöt</i> ("Brown Girls" in Finnish) | POC (people of colour) media and consultancy   | Advertising, consultancy, grants and merchandise   | 34, female, editor-in-chief, journalism, communications and activism   | Five employees and 30–40 freelance contributors                              |
| <i>Sarkamedia</i>                               | Cooperative of journalists and photographers: investigative journalism and book projects | Customer fees  | 28, female, journalist and journalism  | Four journalists and four photographers                                      |
| <i>Toimitus</i> ("Newsroom" in Finnish)         | Podcast productions  | Customer fees  | 40, female, founder, journalism<br>38, male, founder, journalism   | Two founders, an audio producer and a podcast producer                       |

Entrepreneurial news is a relatively new phenomenon in Finland, where the numbers of both entrepreneurial journalism outlets and their audiences lag behind many other countries (Newman et al. 2020). The studied enterprises included all prominent, national entrepreneurial journalism outlets in Finland at the time of data collection. Therefore, no specific selection criteria were used in the sampling, and the selection represents a rather broad array of journalistic outlets. The heterogeneous sample



supports the study's aim of identifying and analysing imaginaries which do not pertain to a particular type of journalism but address the expectations of Finnish journalistic pioneers at large. Despite national contexts, previous research has found that entrepreneurial journalists from different countries and continents share similar journalistic ideals, conceptions and practices (Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019). Thus, Finnish entrepreneurial journalists' imaginaries of the future can likewise reflect ideas that have broader appeal and are not tied to the Finnish context.

Of the outlets, *Long Play*, *Mustread* and *Ruskeat tytöt* produce journalistic content for their own sites. *Long Play* mainly produces long-form articles, often on topics underreported by the Finnish legacy media. *Mustread* produces news and analysis for decision-makers. The core audience of *Ruskeat tytöt* ("Brown Girls" in English) is non-white audiences in Finland, and its viewpoint on current events is informed by intersectional feminism. *Sarkamedia* is a cooperative that produces investigative books, freelance journalism and brand content, whereas *Toimitus* is a podcast production company. *Kuka*, *Rapport* and *Readom* are platforms; *Kuka* offers journalists a diverse pool of sources, *Rapport* is a crowdfunding and publishing platform for journalists and *Readom* is developing a "Spotify for news" type of service. Except for *Ruskeat tytöt*, all the outlets are funded by pay or fee models. *Mustread* complements subscription income with native advertising. *Long Play* and *Ruskeat tytöt* offer training or other consultation services besides their journalistic products.

The interviews were conducted in Finnish at the participant outlets' premises or other places that were apt for a relaxed discussion. In the approximately one-hour interviews, the participants were first asked to describe their journalistic outlet, its founding ideas and how they believe they contribute to the renewal of journalism. These themes shed light on how the interviewees conceive of journalism at present and its potentials they seek to exploit. Regarding how the participants imagine the futures of journalism, they were first asked to describe one to three present trends or phenomena they see as crucial for the future of journalism. This was followed by an enquiry into how journalism at large might change by 2030. The themes covered for futures included journalistic producers, technology, journalistic competencies, audience, reporting styles and business models. The transcribed excerpts selected for this article were translated from Finnish to English by the first author. The first author also conducted the data collection and analysis.

In the analysis, the transcribed interviews were synthesised into an imaginary of the future recurring across the interviews. The imaginary was constructed by deploying a grounded theory approach where simple concepts are first identified in small units of data, which are then compared and grouped into broader and more abstract conceptual categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The analysis was initiated by a line-by-line coding of the interview transcriptions. Short text units were given codes: simple concepts that summarise what is being said (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The coded excerpts were then compared and sorted into thematic groups within an interview. After analysing each transcribed interview, the thematic-conceptual categories were compared across interviews and grouped into higher-level conceptual categories encompassing several interviews. The thematic comparison and sorting across interviews resulted in 18 main categories. These inductively constructed categories

describe the core trends and phenomena the interviewed journalists see as relevant for journalism's development. They include, for instance, categories such as "The influence of new business models on news content" or "Collaborations between newsrooms."

In the last stage of the inductive analysis, the thematic categories and their content were compared to conceive a concept connecting the categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). This comparison yielded *audience* as the core concept that helps make sense of the categories and ties them together. Active "news users" and their needs and preferences are central in all the categories except for those that address the inner workings of newsrooms. The interviewees believe that people increasingly trust media outlets they feel are "their own" and that news content will be ever more targeted at particular interest-based audiences. These dynamics are supported by subscription models and other forms of user payments which, according to the interviewees, create strong incentives to serve specific news audiences instead the general public.

After naming "audiences as news users" as the core concept, the analysis moved from induction to abductive reasoning to connect the inductive categories with existing social imaginaries. In an abductive analysis, inductively produced concepts and categories are elaborated, contextualised and interpreted by drawing on related theories and conceptualisations (Richardson and Kramer 2006). As shown above, the interviewees understood audiences as autonomous actors who come together in networks of interest and affinity. They anticipated that journalists will increasingly connect to such audience communities and produce journalism for their needs. This perceived future expresses the core dynamics of the peer-to-peer imaginary (Bauwens 2005; Benkler 2006). In other words, the journalists build their imaginations of the futures of journalism, probably without being explicitly aware of it, on one of the constitutive imaginaries of the Internet culture.

The futures imaginary shared by the interviewed journalists was constructed in the final phase of the analysis and conceptual categorisation. This was done, first, by selecting from each of the 18 conceptual categories interview excerpts expressing peer-to-peer ideas and practices. These excerpts were then categorised thematically, and the contents of these categories were organised into the narrative presented below. In the last stage of the analysis, the constructed imaginary was contextualised in the existing conditions by reflecting the imaginary against the interviewed journalists' views on journalism at present. Embedding an imaginary of the future in the present can clarify what present potentials actors seek to exploit and the purposes and interests the imaginary serves for them.

## **Entrepreneurial Journalists' Peer-to-Peer Imaginary of the Future**

### ***General Logics of the Imaginary***

All the interviewed journalists brought up a core axiom of the general peer-to-peer imaginary: that people as active users employ media technologies to seek out information and partake in networks of interest and affinity (Turner 2006). The interviewees anticipate a future where audience needs and preferences are a keystone of professional journalism. In the imagined future, journalism is produced for niche audiences

rather than the general public. The interviewees' rationale for emphasising audience needs stems, in part, from the mutual interests of journalists and their audiences but, above all, from economic prospects. They believe audience income will continue to replace income from advertising in the news industry, and journalism will be reshaped with paying audiences in mind. The closer journalists are to their audiences, the better they are assumed to understand the audiences' needs and attract audiences who share similar preferences and tastes—*peers produce journalism to peers*. Furthermore, a connection with audience members does not necessitate direct interaction. The interviewees accentuated that audiences' attention can be attracted through intrinsically motivated journalistic work focused on subjects the journalist personally cares about and finds fulfilling. Here, the journalists' discourse returned to another axiom of peer-to-peer: work that is autonomous and intrinsically motivated.

### ***A Quest for Identity and Community***

In the interviewed journalists' imaginary, societies continue to fragment socially and culturally. Media outlets adopt a new purpose of connecting like-minded people. This pursuit expresses the communalist ideals of the early internet: utopic visions of close groups using technology to withdraw into close-knit, autonomous communities (Turner 2006). As an interviewee described, "The initial idea for our media was that audience members would belong to our 'insider community'. There would be sharing of views, peer support, all confidential" (Int-7). In this imaginary, minority identities are served like never before, but so are achievement-oriented middle-class citizens seeking self-understanding and self-improvement through media content (Int-2). The construction of a media outlet and its community can be a cyclical process where a community and a media outlet are shaped in mutual interactions, as the following quotation illustrates:

We kind of had an audience before we even had our media. First, it was just me. After some blog posts, people started messaging me, and I began meeting with them, inviting people to my home for brunch and having picnics. This was how the community was born. And the community is constantly evolving. People leave if they feel they do not belong, and new people come in. (Int-4)

The interviewees consider the ongoing diversification and fragmentation of societies a complex social process where the political, economic, cultural and technological undercurrents mix. They believe mediated grassroots movements are gaining in importance in public discussion as they respond to the demand for greater diversity of voices (Int-3). In a half-joking nod to a utopic, techno-optimistic, liberal future, one journalist suggested that unforeseen possibilities for self-exploration will arise owing to automation and the additional free time that will potentially open up: "Fully Automated Gay Space Luxury Communism awaits" (Int-1). As a "dark side" of diversity and social liberalism, the interviewees anticipate politics to become increasingly polarised and toxic, particularly due to a far-right backlash to cultural diversification (cf. Benkler 2006). One journalist suggested that the response to the general liberalisation of values and social customs will be a rise of "fascist" media outlets, further aggravated by the crumbling of the ethnic nation state (Int-2).

Nearly all interviewees brought up the challenges facing centrist, liberal politics. Even in Finland, a country of moderate politics and high trust in institutions, societal controversies are believed to be escalating (Int-5). The interviewees see this as a pressing concern particularly for moderate newspapers, which may continue to lose audiences' trust. However, new trust can be found from micro-scale journalism networks that are open to citizens' grassroots networks and where a journalist is "one of the people" (Int-10). Transformative social changes can also result from societies' adaptation to climate change and the decline of global capitalism. This hints at ecologically conscious journalism which is free from market pressures: "by 2030, I hope we are living in a post-carbon and post-capitalist society where everything functions differently" (Int-9). "Post-capitalist" implies a loosening of the economic imperative, which could open space for non-commercial, needs- and use-value based, peer-like relationships between journalists and news users (Orsi 2009).

### ***Journalism Transforms as a Networked Process***

In the imaginary, the media landscape is populated by semi-professional citizen journalists (Int-3, Int-4). Journalism is understood as an open process that can be adopted by various actors outside of professional journalism (Int-2). In the networked and decentralised news ecology, small and collaborative newsrooms are imagined to thrive (Int-3, Int-7, Int-10). Journalistic work is regarded as individualistic and networked. An ideal journalist is a "freely moving nomad" (Int-7) for whom a news organisation is "an enabler of their work" (Int-3). Networked news outlets react nimbly to changes in society and adapt to new social, cultural and economic discussions as they emerge (Int-2, Int-8). Journalism is produced and distributed in intimate groups on WhatsApp, Telegram or other direct messaging services in text, gifs, memes and altogether new forms (Int-7, Int-8, Int-11; see also Kligler-Vilenchik and Tenenboim 2020). Artificial intelligence is used to decrease a journalist's workload and create free time for interacting with audiences (Int-3). 5 G and 6 G cellular networks enhance real-time personalisation of content to meet the diversified demand (Int-6). Algorithms can be designed as "anti-bubble" to reverse-personalise content outside of a user's usual preferences (Int-4).

Journalism-as-process questions conventional notions of journalistic objectivity. In the polarised and diverse political culture with an abundance of conflicting views and information, knowledge is widely understood as shaped by power and privileges (Int-4). Journalists acknowledge that their journalistic output is influenced by who they are, their relationships and the news organisations for which they work. The ability to identify and articulate their position in the fields of knowledge and among social groups has become a core skill for journalists (Int-7). Trust, both social and epistemological, is built on a peer-to-peer basis. It is in the interest of professional journalists to be "human-sized, similar [to audiences], kind of in the same boat with them" (Int-7). According to one interviewee, the shared pool of knowledge on Wikipedia is a future model for building trust, credibility and authenticity in journalism (Int-11).

## ***Enthusiast Journalists Become Peers with Audience Members***

Adaptation to the networked media ecology also concerns journalistic styles. The prevailing voice of journalists is personal, distinctive, and engaged (Int-9). Journalists enhance an intimate attachment with audiences by reporting on issues that interest them personally (Int-8). This echoes what Benkler (2006) describes as “new folk culture” (p. 15) of peer production, where the production of information becomes “as diverse as human thought itself” (p. 33). Paying audiences expect high-quality journalism that serves their specific needs and to which they feel socially and culturally connected (Int-2). As one journalist expressed, “What I sell [...] is my voice and way of writing” (Int-4). In the imaginary, newsrooms become organically connected to the surrounding ecology of networked peers:

A journalist funded by audience payments works for their audience ... They are *peers*. They observe the world together. They are interested in the same subjects. ... [T]he journalist needs to indulge themselves in the subjects they report on, be engaged as a subjective person. (Int-6)

However, journalists still maintain their authoritative position, attained through expert knowledge and unrivalled quality standards (Int-1, Int-4, Int-8). Audiences expect idiosyncratic journalistic content that nevertheless excels in fact verification, rigorous research and the use of expert sources (Int-9). Owing to the abundance of quality information available, journalists are expected to acquire in-depth, almost academic (Int-8) knowledge of their areas of specialisation: “When a journalist is just one source among many others, they have to offer something extra [and] become someone who really is engrossed in their topics of interest” (Int-6). Another interviewee stated along the same lines, “Obscure, ‘out-of-the-box’ journalistic content will be produced by personalities who are genuinely interested in their topics” (Int-9).

## **Embedding the Peer-to-Peer Imaginary in the Present**

Imaginaries are often envisioned as idealised futures emptied of real-world complexities and contradictions (Adam and Groves 2007). The above imaginary, while potentially inspiring, largely omits critical viewpoints, such as the potential precarity of nomadic news work. Journalists who are peers with their audiences can respond to their specific needs, but how are those needs generated? The imaginary assumes an authentic expression of personal and collective needs, but in the existing media environment, user needs and preferences are largely articulated and shaped by audience metrics and data analysis (Steensen, Ferrer-Conill, and Peters 2020).

To avoid an emptied future, imaginaries can be contextualised in the existing historical conditions. In the thematic analysis of the journalists’ views on journalism at present, *autonomy* arose as a core category (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Both personal and collective autonomy are constitutive values of peer-to-peer projects (Lehtiniemi and Ruckenstein 2019). How the participant journalists understand autonomy, among other present themes identified in the interview data, can specify what particular dimensions of the peer-to-peer imaginary attract the interviewed journalists and how these ideas pertain to contemporary journalism.

### ***Autonomy as Self-Determination and Self-Fulfilment***

Journalistic autonomy is conventionally understood as a journalist's professional independence from political, economic or managerial influences (Deuze 2005). From the interviews emerged a more individualistic type of autonomy that undergirds a journalist's professional self-determination, intrinsic motivations, and creativity in the production of journalism. Autonomy is seen as a journalist's opportunity to work the way they prefer and with an ethical integrity (see also Wagemans, Witschge, and Deuze 2016): "what type of journalism I produce, how, with what purposes and with whom" (Int-7). Such conceptions express an emerging professional ethos that underlies non-routine, creative and self-expressive approaches to journalism (Harte, Turner, and Williams 2016). The personal autonomy of journalists connects the peer-to-peer imaginary with calls for personal fulfilment in media consumption as well as working life (Hess and Gutsche 2018).

In a reversed hierarchy between journalists and journalistic organisations, the interviewees described their outlets as an extension of their journalist personalities, interests and networks. They see entrepreneurial news operations as rare places where journalists can focus on work they are intrinsically motivated to do and ethically comfortable performing. As one interviewee described, "there are very few places where you can focus on specific topics [...] I wanted to make different kinds of stories and in a different way [than what I could do in legacy media]" (Int-3). The personalised conception of journalistic autonomy, however, is not merely individualistic but expresses a vision of what the journalistic profession should be like. Personalised professional autonomy creates an expectation of a more diverse journalism in terms of the producers, types, topics, viewpoints and styles of journalism (Int-4, Int-5). In the context of personalised autonomy, the interviewees' self-identification as pioneers occasionally becomes explicit. As one journalist expressed, "In ten years, a bigger and bigger proportion of the Finnish media will look like [our media]" (Int-4).

Like the general peer-to-peer imaginary, "personally engaged" journalistic autonomy delineates journalism as a creation of interpersonal meaning rather than a view from nowhere (Benkler 2006). The interviewees implied that a networked, non-hierarchical, decentralised journalism industry can create journalism that resonates with affinitive audiences and foster a sense of belonging, purpose and meaning (see Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011). In the discourse of ideal peer-to-peer, communal relationships are seen as an authentic form of democratic engagement. However, the combination of self-expression and interpersonal meaning can point towards fragmented publics of interest-based communities. It is questionable whether such decentralised elite publics truly are able to "authentically" serve democracy or whether they, instead, address private pursuits (Turner 2006). As peer-to-peer erodes the public-private distinction in the name of psychological wholeness in one's work and public participation, it simultaneously opens up individuals' inner lives to be exploited by employers and other commercial actors, such as data analytics firms (Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011). Arguably, protecting and cultivating citizens' autonomy requires keeping private lives separate from the public and commercial spheres rather than fusing them together as peer-to-peer suggests (Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011).

The interviewees' conception of journalistic autonomy is brought into sharper focus by a comparison with other themes they consider key to their own journalism. First, they stressed that what gets covered is increasingly determined in journalists' dialogue and information exchanges with niche audiences with specific information needs. The interviewees emphasised their dependence upon audiences who feel attachment to their outlet and who can even become their "fans" (Int-7). Journalism can become—adopting an African-American civil rights slogan—"for us, by us" (Int-4). Second, the interviewees underlined the importance of diversity in the journalists' backgrounds, voices, interests and content as part of their business strategies. This can mean addressing underrepresented views, such as "veganism from the point of view of non-whites" (Int-4), or serving niche interests, such as "labour markets" (Int-6). Third, the interviewees highlighted collaborations between and within media organisations. *Long Play*, for instance, has cooperated with its Dutch counterpart, *De Correspondent*, and *Rapport* claims to foster collaborative journalism by distributing content with a Creative Commons licence. As a similar kind of non-market practice characteristic of peer-to-peer, *Mustread* offers its content for free to its core audience of Finnish decision-makers. It is telling that these collaborations explicitly involve elite groups and seek to enhance *their* competencies and capabilities. Fourth, many interviewees or their outlet apply their autonomy and specialised knowledge for consultancy and brand communications. *Ruskeat tytöt*, for instance, offers consultancy services on intersectional thinking and practice. *Long Play*, perhaps the most journalism-minded of the studied outlets, offers "solutions to communications challenges" as part of its training services.

These four conceptual categories of journalism at present further highlight the individualist and commercial streaks of peer-to-peer, potentially at the expense of its democratic and emancipatory potentials. Real-life peer-to-peer appears as a feedback loop where journalists and news users mutually enforce their autonomy, identities and capabilities. This can be interpreted as a means for pragmatic adaptation to the networked information economy: by drawing from and serving communities of interest, news outlets can build a new business that responds to the increasing demand for specialised information that serves particular identity groups. These insights can be applied to any media production, be it journalism or content produced by non-journalistic brands. However, as argued above, it is questionable whether this type of journalism can truly address diverse information needs or, rather, whether it concerns those cultural representations that are most likely to bring in new income. Moreover, bringing forth the passions of journalists and audiences alike enables news outlets to employ them for commercial purposes—a manoeuvre that will likely decrease rather than enhance their autonomy, as Kreiss, Finn, and Turner (2011) argue. Here, social media becomes vital.

### **Peer-to-Peer as Subordinate to Social Media**

The interviewees ascribe social media a central role in news outlets' content distribution and targeting, audience interaction, peer community building and subscriber growth. They occasionally criticised contemporary social media for prioritising trivial



topics or anticipated increasing resistance against data gathering and content that is targeted according to algorithmically assumed personal preferences (Int-2, Int-10). However, they largely accept it as a fact of “social media realism” that journalism needs to adapt to the deepening power and logics of social media companies. One journalist believes that the “same laws and logics of social media” (Int-4) that we have today will prevail in 2030. Another said that “it is hard to imagine that the gathering and analysis of data would not continue to grow” (Int-3). Projecting a continuation of present trends, the interviewees believe in the development of “sophisticated algorithms and machine learning” that can efficiently “predict what news content people really want to consume” (Int-6). As “data analysis becomes more and more detailed and efficient” (Int-3), algorithms that “learn directly from usage” (Int-6) will become commonplace. Particularly for younger journalist generations, it is increasingly normal to make stories that “are received well on Facebook” (Int-3). In such an environment, some interviewees envision a symbiotic relationship between small content producers and social media companies. In this future, profits in the media industry will be harnessed by two extremes: small producers of niche content on one end and social media giants as distributors of this content on the other end (Int-1, Int-2). One interviewee predicted that platform companies will become “Netflix-like producers of original content” (Int-2), which could involve partnerships with smaller producers of news content.

The reliance on social media supports the thesis that the investigated pioneers employ the peer-to-peer imaginary as a commercial strategy for the networked economy. Through the imaginary, the involved journalists arguably seek to colonise audience communities as an underutilised revenue source (Adam and Groves 2007; Malmelin and Villi 2016). This further supports the view of audiences as *customers* with identity- or interest-based information needs rather than *the public* with a need for credible information (Porlezza and Splendore 2016; Singer 2015). Instead of democratising journalism, such a perception risks making journalism a project for the elites and the educated middle class with fluid, self-reflexive identities, a flair for constant identity work and the resources and motivation to partake in journalist–audience peer networks (Kreiss 2018; Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). It is telling that only one interviewee explicitly raised the possibility of small grassroots news outlets serving the needs of the “common people” (Int-10).

By seeking a sustainable business and an intimate connection with audiences through audience metrics and data analysis (Int-6, Int-3), journalists contribute to serving social media companies’ interests in their quest for ever more detailed and intimate user data (Zuboff 2019). The journalistic peer-to-peer imaginary, thus, contains a possible future in which journalism becomes part of what Zuboff (2019) calls *surveillance capitalism*: a model of value creation in which data extracted from citizens’ behaviour is used as raw material for economic production and a means to manipulate user behaviour. Surveillance capitalism is a response to a need that social media and the Internet initially arose to fulfil: finding shared meaning in a world where traditional sources of meaning have diminished (Zuboff 2019). Similarly, the interviewed journalists emphasised an emerging journalistic role of supporting individuals to find meaning and community through journalism. In these conditions,



peer-to-peer can seem like a compelling model for journalism because it can perform a new “existentialist” self-development function for audiences and simultaneously help harness the collective intelligence of those audiences (Siaperä and Papadopoulou 2016).

## Conclusion and Discussion

This article has explored how Finnish entrepreneurial journalists imagine the futures of journalism. The participant journalists were interviewed about their views of the futures of journalism in general, not entrepreneurial journalism in particular. This is because entrepreneurial journalists are regarded as journalistic pioneers who produce futures knowledge as they imagine new pathways for the development of journalism (Ruotsalainen, Hujanen, and Villi 2021). Futures knowledge—imaginaries and plausible expectations of possible futures—informs and legitimises decisions and future-oriented practices in the present (Beckert 2013; Pouru, Dufva, and Niinisalo 2019). The futures knowledge that journalistic pioneers articulate is not bound to their own contexts but can reflect and influence the conceptions of other actors, such as the legacy media or technology developers (Hepp and Loosen 2021). Thus, by examining journalistic pioneers, the study made explicit and critically assessed the meanings, expectations and value propositions that are promoted and deployed in the journalism industry as it seeks to renew itself for digital futures.

The findings reveal that serving devoted but narrow audiences is the guiding principle in the interviewed journalists’ anticipations of the futures of journalism. To make sense of this audience-centred future, they draw on a general *peer-to-peer imaginary* of digital futures. Peer-to-peer is part of the origin story and emancipatory promises of the Internet (Turner 2006). It creates an expectation of a digital future where hierarchies have been replaced by egalitarian, self-organised networks of shared affinities, interests and resources (Benkler 2006). According to the interviewed journalists’ adaptation of this ideal imaginary, professional journalists produce journalism that corresponds with the interests and tastes of their audiences. The interviewees anticipate journalists and audience members to increasingly communicate and collaborate, journalists to be driven by intrinsic motivations and audiences to contribute to shared resources, such as specialised knowledge and story ideas. They expect these collaborative practices to foster digital subscriptions and other payment models. Despite their imagined status as peers among peers, the interviewees anticipate that journalists will retain their authoritative role due to their expert knowledge and high quality standards (Hujanen 2013). This is a common feature of existing peer projects, which often involve core individuals who are central to the networks and validate other participants’ contributions (Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011).

Contextualised in the pioneer journalists’ views of contemporary journalism and the media environment, their peer-to-peer imaginary appears not as an idealist or radical project but rather as a pragmatist model for adapting to the evolving networked and datafied economy. The interviewees conceive of their audiences as sources of their needs and tastes for enhanced monetisation rather than active participants in the production of professional journalism. They emphasised journalists’ individual autonomy

and self-expression in journalistic work, which are becoming key competencies in the digital economy (Benkler 2006). The journalists' views of both the audiences and their own work, thus, adhere to the requirements of new economic and productive logics according to which it is paramount to understand and manipulate fine-grained user needs and behaviours (Zuboff 2019). Serving these needs often requires producers and consumers to share mutual tastes and preferences (Orsi 2009)—to “observe the world together [as peers],” as one of the journalists explained.

Rather than challenging the powers that be, the interviewed journalists submit to the central role which social media platforms have in contemporary journalism. Their peer-to-peer imaginary aligns with the interests of social media firms that employ similar imaginaries to promote a future where they have become an irreplaceable part of the social and digital infrastructure (Rider and Murakami Wood 2019). In the context of social media, data-driven personalisation and subscription-based business models, the peer-to-peer journalism imagined by journalistic pioneers risks turning quality news away from the general public and into a resource of closed communities and the educated and relatively high-income elites (Benson 2019; Kreiss, Finn, and Turner 2011; Robinson and Wang 2018). Early signs of this type of a future are already visible. Peer-to-peer imaginaries, news subscriptions and social media collide in a new publishing and subscription platform which Facebook is about to roll out (in 2021) for journalists to build audience communities, obtain data on their behaviour and monetise news content (Fischer 2021).

Within such realist-pragmatist perspectives, the pioneer journalists' peer-to-peer imaginary comes across as a “used future” (Inayatullah 2008) rather than the introduction of truly novel ideas in journalism. The examined cases illustrate the persistence of the original, decades-old imaginaries of libertarian, commercialised digital media and business models that exploit user participation (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Turner 2006; Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). The expectations of networked, anti-institutional, and peer-produced news media have since become so ingrained that Starkman (2011) calls them a “future-of-news consensus.” Such consensus risks to colonise the futures of journalism from alternative imaginaries and undermine public-interest reporting (Groves 2017; Starkman 2011).

The analysed imaginary of pioneer journalists parallels the early adherents of technology-enabled peer-to-peer communities who, by the 1980s, had evolved into groups of global, entrepreneurial, networked and technology-savvy information professionals, including journalists, who exchanged views and information in online communities (Turner 2006). The same exclusiveness and stratification are on display in today's mediated communities and discussion groups, where active contributors are a small minority of all users (Van Dijck and Nieborg 2009). While entrepreneurial news outlets often herald themselves as grassroots resources for ordinary people to drive social change (Wagemans, Witschge, and Harbers 2019), the uneven distribution of resources and motivation to participate can undermine these expectations of empowered publics. Entrepreneurial journalists' peer-to-peer imaginary seems not to be geared towards serving the general public but relatively small groups of information elites, who are engaged to learn from a specialised field of knowledge and capable of paying for such knowledge (Robinson and Wang 2018). If the peer-to-peer imaginary were to be

broadly applied as a model for journalism, it could risk further fragmenting the public sphere, intensifying social stratification, and deepening inequalities in citizens' information resources.

The findings of this study are limited particularly because the data were sampled exclusively from Finland, where entrepreneurial journalists remain relatively marginal in the journalistic field (Newman et al. 2020). The infancy of the Finnish entrepreneurial journalism ecosystem can accentuate the need to focus on core audiences and turn to "used" futures, such as assuming a pragmatist and somewhat uncritical attitude towards commercial social media. Future studies can examine whether similar imaginaries of peer-to-peer are at work in the anticipations of journalistic pioneers in other countries. The audiences of entrepreneurial news provide another object of study—particularly their motivations to consume this news content and to take part in the communities that form around entrepreneurial news outlets. Studies can also examine peer-to-peer ideas, imaginaries and applications in legacy news media. A concern regarding all news media is how journalists respond to the potential risks of serving specific, limited audiences and their needs and the possible fragmentation of news into exclusive communities that this entails.

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