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Embracing the unexpected: Exploring the role of serendipity in newswriting

Lauri Haapanen
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Daniel Perrin
Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Switzerland

Abstract

This paper explores the role of serendipity in journalistic decision-making. The authors draw on 25 years of newsroom ethnography to introduce the concept of a horizon of foreseeable forthcoming phases (HFFP). This concept encompasses the potential next steps that journalists envision in their text production processes, based on the decisions they already made.

The authors then analyze two complementary cases to illustrate how serendipity can influence journalistic decision-making. In the Bishop case, Type I serendipity opens up a valuable alternative to the journalist's planning, leading them to pursue a new story. In contrast, in the Leba case, Type II serendipity is essential to helping the journalist overcome a seemingly hopeless situation. The authors conclude by arguing that serendipitous moments and the resulting emergent solutions hold the potential to reshape journalistic practices and routines, both on the micro level of text production, and on the macro level of professional development. They emphasize the growing importance of serendipity in times where human intelligence competes with algorithms.

Keywords

A horizon of foreseeable forthcoming phases (HFFP), creativity, journalistic decision-making, newsroom ethnography, newswriting, progression analysis, serendipity

Corresponding author:
Lauri Haapanen, University of Jyväskylä, Seminaarinkatu 15, Jyväskylä, 40014, Finland.
Email: lauri.m.haapanen@jyu.fi

Why serendipity in journalism matters

From a view of integrative social theories (e.g., Archer, 2000), journalists have partial control over newswriting. They shape its course through decision-making, enabled and constrained by, for example, legal frameworks, professional standards, newsroom routines, and individual preferences. We have tracked changes in this decision-making over the last 25 years by analyzing journalists' material, mental, and social activities of news production in context (Perrin, 2021). In doing so, we combined emic and etic perspectives (Haapanen and Manninen, 2023). In this paper, we highlight the role and growing relevance of serendipity in journalistic decision-making.

The word *serendipity*, first coined in 1754,[1] was used only among literary enthusiasts until the turn of the 20th century. In 1909, it made its first dictionary appearance in The Century Dictionary and Cyclopedia. In the 1930s, *serendipity* transitioned from literary circles to the scientific community, initially gaining prominence among natural and social sciences (Merton and Barber, 2004). From 1940 to 2024, its usage in published literature increased by a factor of 101.43, as indicated by Books Ngram Viewer.[2] Despite this growth, its role in journalism and news production remained unexplored until recently.

Drawing on 25 years of newsroom ethnography, we started to fill this gap with in-depth analyses of decision-making in the newsroom (e.g., Haapanen, 2017, 2020; Perrin, 2013). In this paper, we introduce two complementary concepts to further explore the role of serendipity in journalistic decision-making: The first concept is the *horizon of foreseeable forthcoming phases* (HFFP). When journalists make decisions while writing news, the HFFP opens up in front of them. It encompasses the potential next steps that journalists envision, based on the decisions they already made. The second concept is the – often disruptive – *serendipitous moment*:

Serendipitous moments can happen when journalists are confronted with something unexpected – something that falls outside the scope of their anticipated HFFP. The data analyzed in a series of case studies provide evidence that less experienced journalists may perceive these events as undesirable, as hindering the planned and foreseeable process, or even as bound to failure. Experienced journalists, however, tend to perceive unexpected events as inspiring, as drivers of categorically new outcomes. If they opt to seize such serendipity, they must adapt the process and pursue a new, fundamentally shifted HFFP.

On the empirical level of this paper, we analyze two complementary cases in all detail: the Bishop case, in which serendipity just opened up a valuable alternative to the journalist's planning so far – and the Leba case, in which serendipity was a conditio sine qua non on the way to accomplishing the journalist's writing task. Before going any further, let us have a first, brief look at what the journalists do in these two cases and how their text production activity in general and decision-making in particular is connected to HFFPs and serendipity. Seeing the connections at a glance will help readers understand the gist of the paper before digging deeper into the matter.

In the Bishop case, a journalist and a photographer working for a Finnish student magazine, a renowned platform for ambitious experiments by emerging journalists, did research for a reportage on energy issues between Finland and Russia. After driving hundreds of kilometers along the border to Russia, they stopped for a coffee in a remote

hotel – when suddenly Bishop Ambrosius, the retired leader of Orthodox Church in Finland, stepped in. The two media professionals did not hesitate to change their plans short-term and engage in an interview with the Bishop. The impromptu meeting eventually formed a seventh of the text mass of their extensive reportage.

Serendipity, in the Bishop case, means taking the chance to go for a completely unexpected but promising option instead of pursuing the planned journalistic research. In practice, this decision resulted in delving into a totally new story while postponing the work on the planned reportage. However, it does not mean that the serendipitous moment was in any way necessary to help the media professionals solve – or escape from – a critical situation they could not have overcome without serendipity. It was just about another good horizon to choose, instantly.

By contrast, the Leba case provides evidence of serendipity as opening up promising avenues in basically hopeless moments, in super-critical situations. A very experienced journalist, former Middle East correspondent, was to compose an item for the Swiss National TV news program. The topic he had to cover was protests in Lebanon. The archive footage he got, from newsfeeds and the broadcasters' own archive, all showed outraging violence, killing, rioting. Using these images would have catered to the Western stereotype of permanent wars in the Middle East, thought the journalist.

In his experience, however, demonstrations in Lebanon can be peaceful, too, and this reality tends to be neglected in Western public discourse. Since he considers fostering unbiased views to be a key part of a public service provider's mandate, he decided not to add yet another item to the news that caters to the brash stereotype. But how should he visualize peaceful demonstrations in his news item without any supporting, attractive footage? After getting stuck in this critical situation, he desperately scanned hours of video footage in time lapse mode. By doing so, he happened to come across a scene that triggered an emergent solution for his item.

In both cases, serendipitous moments changed the HFFP of the journalists at work, offering an attractive alternative in the Bishop case and helping out of seemingly hopeless critical situation in the Leba case. We consider these two cases prototypes on a continuum. Being open to the unexpected and catching a serendipitous moment can, as Type I serendipity, make a journalist's work even more exciting – and, as Type II, enables them to accomplish their task in situations of clashing contradictory expectations. In the Type I case, the emergent new solution redirects the production process, in the Type II case, it helps resume this process after getting completely stuck.

The following sections of the paper dig deeper into the two cases and their analysis. In the research state section, we discuss the key concepts of *serendipity* and *HFFP* in the context of critical situations, emergent outcomes, and good practices. In the methodology section, we explain Progression Analysis as the multimethod approach applied. This leads to a step-by-step analysis of the Bishop and the Leba case. We argue that these two cases mark the two ends of a continuum in the scope of journalistic text production in which serendipity comes into play.

We conclude by explaining why, from both emic and etic perspectives, emergent solutions hold the potential and power to reshape our present and future reality: Not only do they solve a text production problem, but they can also impact individual and organizational journalistic practices and routines. Emergent solutions through serendipity are in

high demand in times where human intelligence competes with algorithms simulating intelligence while recycling (Haapanen and Perrin, 2020) big data from the past. Serendipity disrupts the perpetuation of loops, opening up non-anticipated horizons, on both micro and macro levels of text production.

Key concepts: From serendipitous moments to emergent outcomes

In this section, we first trace the concept of serendipity in academic discourse. Based on established understanding from and in other fields, we then formulate our definition of *serendipitous moments* and *foreseeable forthcoming phases* in journalism. Finally, we contextualize our definitions by relating them to the concepts of *critical situations*, *good practices*, and *emergent outcomes*, as discussed for journalism in previous work.

Serendipity in journalism and media studies

Random events are essential to serendipity, but serendipity is not just about chance, luck, or divine providence. It has said to be a result from the process of *bisociation*, which is combining seemingly unrelated ideas or concepts (Koestler, 1964), in contrast to association, where the connection is close and expected. A similar understanding can also be found in the scarce-numbered papers in journalism and media studies that have focused on serendipity. They argue that serendipity in journalism is not just a fortunate accident, but a complex interplay of individual capabilities, organizational structures, and environmental factors.

Malmelin and Virta (2017, 2019) emphasize the interplay between serendipity, organizational creativity, and strategic management in media organizations. They highlight how cultural aspects within organizations, such as autonomy and mutual trust, can foster or hinder the potential for serendipitous creativity. These observations are supported by organizational studies where different forms of serendipity have been typologized (de Rond, 2014) and explored in more detail in terms of how organizational settings (Cunha et al., 2010) and other external circumstances can facilitate or impede serendipitous discoveries (McCay-Peet and Toms, 2015).

In turn, Bird-Meyer and Erdelez (2021) and Bird-Meyer et al. (2019) focus more on the practical aspects of serendipity in journalism. Their studies shed light on how journalists and editors encounter and interact with serendipitous events in their day-to-day work, particularly in story ideation and newsroom meetings. Maares et al. (2023) highlight an interesting aspect related to the consolidation of office spaces and, especially, the increased prevalence of remote work following Covid-19: The physical and social environment of newsrooms is significant in enabling serendipitous encounters.

Serendipity is often defined in relation to *creativity*, and creativity, in turn, is frequently limited to *ideation* in both academic research and journalistic practice (e.g., Koivula et al., 2023; Nylund, 2013). Bird-Meyer et al. (2019: 1000), for example, asked journalists in semi-structured interviews, ‘when they serendipitously encountered story ideas’, thereby constraining the scope of their answers to serendipity during idea generation. The same applies to Malmelin and Virta’s (2019) framing of serendipipitous

moments during data collection. In our understanding, however, serendipity can influence any stage of the newswriting process.

Serendipitous moments and HFPPs

Taking into account both the historical perspective of the concept of serendipity and how it has been specifically addressed in journalism and media studies, as serendipitous moments we define surprising discoveries that leverage the processes and products of newswriting unexpectedly. These unexpected discoveries might be triggered either by an external impetus or internal insight. Their consequences range from substantial but optional improvements to the emerging text product – to ways out of otherwise hopelessly muddled situations that had seriously threatened the success of the writing project.

Opportunities for such serendipitous moments to happen stem from the fact that journalism takes shape as a structurally (e.g., Reese, 2021; Ryfe, 2016) and discursively (e.g., Hanitzsch and Vos, 2017) defined institution. (News-)writing is a tense interplay between organizational routines to cope with uncertainty and the nonlinear nature of real-world context itself. The routines include decisions about what to report, how to report it, and which sources or angles to pursue (Tuchman, 1973). Yet, the real-world context can make journalists encounter totally unexpected developments, which can significantly affect the story's trajectory. In more detail, this means:

There are standards that journalists are expected to follow in their work. They encompass principles of factual writing as well as current industry trends and journalistic tenets, such as, adherence to news standards and balanced or priority-based reporting. Above all, on societal levels, the work is influenced by legal and ethical constraints. On a company level, the work is defined by available resources and newsroom-specific working methods, expectations, and directives. Finally, on a personal level, each journalist carries their own routines as well as personal values and preferences.

While this established framework sets the stage for journalists and their practices, some real-world events do not adhere to predefined patterns or predictions. Sometimes, they tend to be unpredictable and nonlinear. This creates a context that is fraught with uncertainties. Unexpected incidents, ranging from grassroots phenomena to large-scale events, can all affect newswriting. In the Bishop case, for example, a large-scale change as horrific as the Russian invasion to Ukraine shut up the border between Finland and Russia thus forcing to change the original idea to conduct a reportage trip across the border.

Beyond the unpredictability of external events, another layer of uncertainty arises from information asymmetry. Journalists often do not have the same level of detail knowledge as experts of the subject matter a news item deals with. In the Bishop case, for example, the journalist reached out to an oil refinery company's press officer to get an expert commentary of their business prospects. The press officer is privy to a roster of experts and their availability, as well as the company's politics regarding who has the right to address the matter in question, while the journalist started from a point of limited knowledge.

So how do journalists navigate along the edge between deterministic guidelines and the unpredictable nature of the working environment? When analyzing cases such as Bishop and Leba in depth from an outsider's etic view, which is, a researcher's perspective, it becomes clear that journalists do not have full control over the decision-demanding situations that arise during the process. Complementing then this *etic* perspective with the insider's *emic* one reveals something striking: while navigating through uncertainties, the journalists did not feel aimlessly driven by external forces. Quite the opposite.

In the Bishop case, the journalist and the photographer planned to visit specific locations along Finland's eastern border and to stop at service station cafes to engage with ordinary people. 'We had thought carefully about what kind of people we might meet there and what they really could say about energy politics and the strained relations between Finland and Russia; about the kind of material we would need and could get', the journalist said. He listed themes and questions, while the photographer thought about the pictures the story would need. They ended up visiting nearly twenty service stations, 'and yes, these visits went exactly as expected'.

This is what we have referred to as the *horizon of foreseeable forthcoming phases* (HFFP): Writers progress their newswriting by envisioning the HFFP in front of them. Phase by phase, they anticipate their options and choose the best of potential next phases, drawing on their goal and knowledge, often unconsciously. After such an anticipated phase has become a reality, writers may perceive it as a possibility they have deemed feasible and reasonably anticipated. They were prepared for this option, be it only mentally (Stocking and Gross, 1989) or, in some cases, such as Bishop, also materially, as anticipations in written sketches and lists of questions.

From a journalists' perspective, this means that newswriting has progressed – albeit uncontrollably to a certain extent – *as expected* in terms of options available. While realizing a specific phase often stems from chance or external factors, the journalist tends to foresee the range of options in the HFFP as a result of his or her agency and expertise. In other words, even if a news story emerges from the unexpected, routines tend to be used as a means to deliver it on a predictable basis (Tandoc and Duffy, 2019: 2). This said, we move on to examining scenarios which are in one way or another critical and therefore require emergent solutions to be made to keep the process going.

Critical situation, emergent outcome, and good practice

Imagine a journalist is an expert on the political developments in a certain region of the Middle East. He has often been there for longer periods and has the educational background to explain what is going on. Now, this journalist is asked to report on manifestations that take place in this region. He knows that, so far, they have been more or less peaceful, similar to the usual manifestations in the place where he and his audience live. However, when being told to produce this news piece he feels that his boss, his colleagues, and even the standard news agencies' footage implicitly expect him to cater to the stereotype of riots in this region.

This is exactly what happened in the Leba case. The Journalist realized, once more, how difficult it was to work against the brash stereotype of the seemingly newsworthy

violence in Middle East. From his direct sources in the region, he knew that there was no remarkable violence to report on; all the burning cars and fighting people in the news footage were old material, from earlier events. But how to report on just peaceful demonstrations so far away without eye-catching images that make up a TV news story? Should he give up, follow the mainstream reporting and fabricate yet another story on violence, against better judgment?

After all, he worked for a public service provider, whose mandate included nuanced reporting that helps the audience understand what is going on in the world. The incompatibility of this public mandate and his expert knowledge on the one hand and the expectations to sell an action movie story on the other hand put him into a critical situation. By *critical situation*, we understand a constellation of circumstances which lead to failure unless a solution emerges at a higher level (Perrin, 2013: 202). For the LEBA journalist, failure would have meant to take the path of least resistance under time pressure by doing what his media environment suggested.

What saved this journalist from giving up is an *emergent solution*, starting from a serendipitous moment, in which he spotted some new seconds of unusual visuals in all the old footage on violence: Two boats moving slowly in the water, carrying people on their way to join the manifestations. He found these scenes strange and downloaded them. Only then he realized he could use them to visualize the story he considered appropriate. He included them and explained in the item that they showed the ferry connection called *Express way* in the region. Finally, the wordplay *Tranquil way* came to his mind as a leitmotif for his item on peaceful protests.

Finding these pictures and, ultimately, the emergent solution was a consequence of serendipity. However, experiencing the serendipitous moment did not come as a total surprise to the experienced journalist. He knew that, in critical situations, reframing one's view on the subject can help shift levels and find solutions. So he deliberately browsed the footage, back and forth, with 'eyes wide open but unfocused', as he put it. To him, this way of moving on instead of getting stuck in conflicting expectations is a good practice: a proven procedure to overcome a critical situation (Perrin, 2013: 202) – in this case by fostering conditions for serendipitous moments.

Method: Investigating serendipity in the newsroom

Now imagine, on the one hand, this journalist changing one single word in his emerging text. By doing so, he creates a whole news story and, finally, reshapes a public service broadcasting company's view on their public mandate. Imagine, on the other hand, a methodological approach that is deep and broad enough to analyze such an interplay of situated activity with social contexts. We have termed this approach *progression analysis* (e.g., Perrin, 2003, 2013). It enables researchers to obtain data on three complementary level: as a social, material, and mental activity in organizational and societal frameworks.

Writing as a social activity

The first level of progression analysis considers the writers and the writing situation, including the writers' professional socialization and economic, institutional, and

technological influences on the work situation. This encompasses the specific writing task that the writers must accomplish and the workplace negotiations. Ethnographic data are collected through unstructured participatory observations of organizational practices as well as interviews about them. Micro findings on this level of progression analysis explain, for example, writers' openness to the unexpected; macro findings can show the emergence and diffusion of a new practice within an organization.

Of course, progression analysis requires ethical, legal, and technical prudence. Preparing for recordings normally starts by negotiating with a media company's legal service and tech department. The LEBA case for example was recorded in a research project that lasted 5 years in total (Perrin, 2012). The entire first year was scheduled as a preparation phase, only then data recording could begin. This phase resulted in a contract specifying, for example, that during the data recordings, a member of the research team had to be available on-site for the journalists whose actions were recorded, be it in the newsroom or in the field.

These on-site researchers' job was to monitor the automatic recordings from video cameras, but also the logging software mirroring all the computer activities (see next section) – and to delete whatever a person under investigation did not want to have included in the research corpus before the data were saved for the project. Every journalist participating in the project, including the media managers in the newsrooms, had the right to prevent their data from being included in the corpus or being analyzed. Interestingly, only one of the journalists from all the newsrooms under investigation ever exercised this right.

How can this be explained? – The long preparation time for recordings with progression analysis is used mainly to build trust between the journalists and the researchers and to establish a consensus about shared goals. In the project in which the LEBA case was recorded, both the media managers and the journalists participated in the research process from the beginning. They were able to contribute their ideas during the project preparation, and every single journalist was invited to discuss the project with the research team before any computer or video recordings were started.

Based on his experience with previous similar research projects, the head of the research team could provide evidence that the journalists involved would benefit from feedback sessions where they could analyze their practices together with researchers. In addition, previous projects had shown that the knowledge generated was published in a way that did not negatively expose the practitioners investigated. This helped the project management team get and keep the journalists and the media management on board, even subsequent to the completion of the project when research findings were presented and measures were implemented.

After this preparatory phase of getting access to the sources, data had to be collected in as ecologically as possible a procedure. Ecological research in practitioners' sites such as newsrooms gathers data at interfaces where they are typically exchanged in daily routines. With progression analysis, this happens at two interfaces. At the human-human interface, for example, in sessions of journalists and video editors or in editorial conferences, the researchers capture spoken language and, depending on the camera position, body language as well. At the human-machine interface, the researchers log the activities on screens and keyboards, as explained below.

Writing as a material activity

On the material level, progression analysis records observable writing activities, such as every keystroke and writing movements in the emerging text on the computer screen. Keystroke logging programs run in the background behind the text editors that the writers usually use, for instance behind the user interfaces of their company's editing systems. The computer recordings provide information about what writers do during the text production process, micro step by micro step. Findings on this level can reveal, for example, the detailed writing activities in critical situations and serendipitous moments.

At the input end of the human-computer interface, keyboard activity can be transcribed manually from screen recordings. Alternatively, it can be recorded automatically by keylogging software (Lindgren and Sullivan, 2019). Once collected, the data are processed quantitatively and qualitatively. Newswriting research has developed basic data formats for both approaches: the revision as the minimal unit of writing activity, and the proposition as the minimal unit of verbalized decision making in a text production process (see next section). Both revision and propositions function as the coding units for all material activities and mental representations. Related to these formats are standardized transformation procedures and notation systems.

In the tradition of computer-based writing research (e.g., Severinson-Eklundh and Sjöholm, 1991), a revision is the minimal procedural unit of writing processes. Revisions consist of a sequence of operations to either insert a single stretch of characters in a growing text or delete a single stretch of characters from it. Therefore, revisions are categorized as either insertions or deletions. An insertion entails a continuous stretch of characters that is added to an existing text anywhere but at the end. A deletion, in contrast, consists of any stretch of characters that is eliminated from a text. Making changes in a text often combines deletions with insertions.

The sequence of revisions of a writing process can be transcribed in S-notation: This transcription standard marks insertions and deletions and indicates their sequence in the writing process (Severinson-Eklundh and Kollberg, 1996). Wherever the writing is interrupted to delete or add something, S-notation inserts the break-character $|_n$ in the text. Deleted passages are in ^{n}[square brackets]^n and insertions in ^{n}{curly braces}^{n}, with the small numbers indicating the order of these steps. In the following example from the Leba case, the word *express* is deleted first, then the word *tranquille* is inserted instead. The underlining indicates the text that appears in the final version.

par la voie ^{20}[express]$^{20}|_{21}$ ^{21}{tranquille}^{21} de la Médit^4[e$|_4$]^{4}érannée

Example 1. Revisions from the Leba case. Source: tsr_tj_070214_1245_rg_lebanon_snt_3

Technically spoken, what S-notation describes is an incremental series of interim versions of an emerging text. With each revision, a writer produces a next version of his or her text. This can go on for minutes, hours, days or even weeks, depending on the time frame of the writing project. For practical reasons, research on extended writing projects, such as in the Bishop case, can focus on the main interim stages only instead of capturing

each and every revision. In this case, the material activity of writing at the human-computer interface is documented in a more coarse-graded way, as the sequence of interim versions resulting from the main writing stages.

Writing as a mental activity

The third level of progression analysis draws on verbal data to infer the mental structures that might have guided the writing activities observed on the second level. After finishing a text production process, writers view a playback of their process and watch how their text emerges. While doing so, they are prompted to continuously comment on what they did while writing. An audio recording is made of this verbalization and transcribed in a cue-based retrospective verbal protocol (RVP). The RVP is then encoded. Findings on this level can provide insights into, for example, a writer's conscious decisions to cope with a critical situation.

These conscious decisions are described in a propositional format. A proposition is the mental reconstruction of a newswriting practice, for example ADJUSTING TEXT TO WHAT PICTURES SHOW. The propositional format is: [to do X]. In the RVP from the LEBA case, this proposition ADJUSTING TEXT TO WHAT PICTURES SHOW is expressed in an utterance about the term *express way* not being a good idea, given the speed of the boats in the pictures. The writer therefore replaces 'express way', which is a literal translation of the local term for the direct route over the Mediterranean Sea of the ferry boats in the picture, by the metaphorical notion 'tranquil way'.

0181	express quand on voit la vitesse des bateaux
0182	ce n'est pas une bonne idée
0183	donc je vais changer

Example 2. Verbal protocol from the LEBA case.

Again, in long-term writing projects, researchers can interview the writers based on the main interim products. This can happen in between the individual writing session or at the end. Interim interview and the resulting RVPs risk influencing the next writing phases but tend to be more accurate, based on fresh memories – whereas RVP data collected at the end of a long-term writing process is ecological in terms of avoiding any influence on the ongoing process, at the cost of details that can be remembered accurately. In collecting level-3 data on the BISHOP case, the researchers had the journalists comment on interim versions in between writing phases.

In sum, progression analysis enables researchers to contextualize a text production process within social institutions such as professions and organizations; to trace in detail the development of the emerging text; and finally, to reconstruct the writers' considerations from different perspectives. Combining the levels of progression analysis allows the strategies and practices that writers articulate in their RVPs to be placed in relation to the data about their social and material activities. Product features such as a leitmotif in final texts become understandable as resulting from complex writing activities in dynamic contexts.

As there are no direct interfaces for thoughts, data about conceptualizations and intentions have to be generated especially for research purposes, but still as ecologically as possible. Retrospective verbalizations match these needs if they are collected as immediately as possible after the journalists have implemented their products. This avoids disturbing the work in the newsroom while it is in process. Subsequent text production, however, may be affected by journalists' self-reflexive processes triggered by the verbalization itself. Therefore, progression analysis designs normally specify only one retrospective verbalization protocol per writer.

Findings: Comparing two types of journalistic serendipity

As we have explained, the *horizon of foreseeable forthcoming phases* (HFFP) denotes journalists' anticipation of upcoming steps in their newswriting. While maintaining such a mental model does not imply the journalists have complete control over it, the notion underscores their capacity to navigate the inherent unpredictability of newswriting. In this section, we first draw on extracts from case studies to outline the continuum ranging from serendipity nice to have to serendipity as the third way out. We then analyze in detail the serendipitous moments in the two cases introduced above, Bishop and Leba.

Understanding the range

Based on our analysis, there is a continuum between two poles of serendipity to explore. Type I serendipity unveils a valuable alternative that enriches the journalist's HFFP. Here we can speak of serendipity as an unexpected luxury, as nice to have, as helping a good endeavor get better in passing. In contrast, Type II serendipity guides the journalists out of a critical situation in which there is no HFFP in sight anymore, no reasonable way to continue, no routinized solution at hand, no ready-made creative variation applicable. Three brief insights into real-life cases help illustrate the main characteristics of serendipity along this continuum.

On the very Type I end of the continuum, journalists encounter situations where surprising turns arise, yet do not make them abandon their HFFPs. Potential new options are considered not promising enough – or too demanding to be realized. The latter happened, for example, when a journalist reporting on an election prediction company stumbled upon an earlier version of the company's website and noticed details that contradicted his interviewee's statements. However, he did not feel equipped to leverage a potentially serendipitous discovery: 'I didn't feel like I had enough expertise on the matter'.

Further away from the type I pole are situations where journalists, even when able to continue with their original HFFPs, come across unexpected occurrences so inspiring and laden with promising outcomes that they cannot resist the opportunity. To capitalize on this, they must formulate a new HFFP. For example, a journalist reported on a municipality's decision to ban singing in schools due to COVID-19. In the middle of the process of newswriting, she serendipitously discovered a petition signed by dozens of teachers. By giving prominence to this petition, she succeeded in adding an entirely new dimension to her story.

Yet another step further toward the Type I pole, there are situations where journalists find themselves in the right place at the right time, and the surprise completely astonishes those involved. An exemplary instance is the Bishop case that we will delve into in the upcoming section. In this case, the most unexpected encounter in a remote cafeteria ignites both the journalist's and the photographer's enthusiasm and inspiration. This truly makes them tick – and change their plans, both on the level of organizing their workflow and of composing their emerging piece.

In a close-to-type-II case, a journalist writing about fertility treatments reached out to a fertility clinic for interviewees – and was introduced to a couple who insisted on anonymity. This was not what the journalist had expected: 'Nowadays people discuss such things openly, so it would have seemed odd to do it anonymously'. So she rejected the offer. Instead, she started to follow some Instagram accounts maintained by single mothers with donor-conceived children. There, she found another interviewee, and this aspect, which she initially did not anticipate focusing on, unexpectedly became the central theme of the story.

A step further involves situations where the unexpected move does not come from external sources – like social media in the above case – but from the journalists' persistence and determined trust in their competence. When producing a TV news item under harsh time pressure, a journalist insisted on including a certain quote to balance the perspectives. This quote, however, was formulated in a lengthy and clumsy way. Both the newsroom's editor-in-chief and the video editors strongly suggested to delete the quote. Last minute, the journalist found a trick to tighten up the quote while keeping the essence of the statement.

At the Type II end of the continuum, we situate The Leba case. It exemplifies a journalist who, finding himself at a writing impasse, is unable to identify a satisfactory HFFP to pursue. Such a situation becomes critical, with the potential to halt the journalistic process entirely. The Leba case stands out, illustrating how a brief, fleeting happenstance can spark a serendipitous aha moment, serving as a lifeline. This case, together with the Bishop case, are analyzed in more detail below. The case analyses both follow a narrative standard structure developed for case-based knowledge transformation in transdisciplinary research (Perrin, 2013: 265).

A Type I case: Bishop

a **Journalist**: J.R., born in 1991, earned a university degree in communication and journalism, with additional studies in Russian culture, politics, and language. At the time of data collection, he was a subeditor at Ylioppilaslehti (see below, b) and a visiting researcher at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland, whose principal mission includes supporting sustainable development in the Arctic. He considers climate change one of his key areas of expertise. With ten years in journalism, J.R. has primarily worked as a freelancer for newspapers and magazines. 'My greatest interest lies in long-form written journalism', he says.

b **Workplace**: Ylioppilaslehti, founded in 1913, is a Finnish student magazine published by the Student Union of the University of Helsinki. The magazine is available in both print and online formats. It covers not only university-related

affairs but also areas such as culture and social issues with an in-depth and investigative approach. As the editorial staff changes every 2 years, it serves as a showcase, where ambitious, sometimes gonzo-style, journalism projects are pursued. For many, it has been a springboard to prominent careers; among its former editors-in-chief is Urho Kekkonen, who served as the President of Finland from 1956 to 1981.

c, d **Production patterns** and **collaboration patterns**: J.R. has a clear view on the professional attitude needed for reportage. 'One does not simply go to confirm preconceived perspectives and ideas, but with an open mind to see what is really happening on the ground'. J.R. has worked with photographer T.H. as a team for about 3 years, and they are good friends who brainstorm seamlessly and react to things similarly. 'Therefore, when working, we dare to leave, so to speak, some slack, that if something turns out to be more interesting, then we can give it a chance'.

e **Bishop task**: The Bishop case was produced as part of a transdisciplinary research project (Flowision,[3] 2020–2024), examining societal discussions around fossil and renewable energy and their integration into political choices in Russia and Finland. The consortium, funded by a grant, provided this task with unique conditions. 'Normally, we don't do week-long reportages at Yliopilaslehti. And T.H and I are accustomed to staying in guesthouses and even some moldy saunas, but this time, we had the opportunity to stay in quite upscale places'.

The original idea for the Bishop case was to travel to Russia for a reportage, tracing, for example, the oil pipeline from Surgut to Primorsky on the eastern coast. However, the attack of Russia against Ukraine on 24 February of 2022 shattered these plans. This critical situation prevented J.R. and T.H. from pursuing any of their envisioned HFFPs. Consequently, they drastically altered the plan, opting to visit Southeast and Eastern Finland instead. Their focus shifted to reporting on how the renouncing of Russian energy is being implemented in practice and what people living in the Eastern border region of Finland think about all this. 'We had to quickly come up with this new approach, so it was largely improvised'.

f **Process**: For the reportage trip, a duration of 6 days was agreed upon, during which they would drive approximately 1400 km. Looking at their HFFP, the horizon was partly carefully planned and well-defined, but partly vague and open: On the one hand, they planned to visit determined places like the oil refinery in Porvoo and the liquefied natural gas (LNG) terminal in Hamina. On the other hand, they intended to stop at service station cafes along their route and interview people who happened to be there. Basically, anything and anyone could fit into such a wide-open HFFP. So serendipitous moments were, at least unconsciously, built into the plan.

The evening had already come when they arrived at a small remote hotel. 'The place was about to close, and we were just going for a coffee'. Then, Bishop Ambrosius, the retired leader of the Orthodox Church in the Helsinki metropolitan area, who is quite often seen in public, happened to enter the restaurant. 'It was just a coincidence. Of course, we had no idea we would meet and interview Bishop Ambrosius. He just happened to be there'. J.R. and T.H. did not want to

In Parikkala, 55 kilometers northeast of Ruokolahti, a new border crossing was recently completed. It cost over 25 million euros and was closed due to the war even before its opening.

Located along Highway 6 is the hotel restaurant Kägöne. The place is about to close, but the hotelier, Pertti Vuolli, calls from the doorway, asking if coffee is still desired.

Then Bishop Ambrosius bursts in. He is a retired leader of the Church in the Helsinki metropolitan area and the face of the Orthodox Church! "Coincidence is not a very theological concept. God too needs his helpers," jokes the Bishop.

He has just come from a funeral in Hamina. The conversation dives into deep waters: life and death, war and peace.

Figure 1. Excerpt from the published article introducing Bishop Ambrosius in the reportage. Translation from Finnish: Lauri Haapanen.

miss this opportunity. Suddenly, a completely new HFFP opened up in their reportage project. 'I then had to improvise what I dare ask the Bishop, and I didn't have any other note-taking tools with me, so I recorded it with my phone'.

g **Product**: This serendipitous encounter turned out to be very important for the story: of the over 16,000 characters in the finished article, 13% dealt with it, and this happy incident was also depicted in photographs. The reported conversation covered war, peace, hope, and the various positions the different churches had taken on the war in Ukraine, and it even drifted into discussing what a coincidence it was that they met in the first place. In the RVP, the journalist says: 'A reportage sometimes writes itself when you spend enough time and when your senses are open' (Figure 1).

h **Focus of analysis**: Introducing the meeting with Bishop Ambrosius into the story was a challenge, said J.R. From the perspective of reportage-like newswriting – *let's see what comes up* – the Bishop's interview would seem unbelievable; what was serendipity in reality would seem like a pre-arranged meeting in the reportage. So J.R. came up with an emergent solution to scale up the 'coincidence' from backstage to frontstage. So the serendipitous moment became a key element of the narration in the final product – which is rare in journalism, despite the often proclaimed ideal of transparency (e.g., Fengler and Speck, 2019; Haapanen, 2022; Karlsson, 2011) as 'the new objectivity' (Weinberger, 2009).

i **Potential for knowledge transformation**: J.R. and T.H. enhanced their reportage through an open-minded approach, readily adapting to deviations from their original HFFP. Their work underscores essential journalistic skills, including keen awareness of their surroundings and the adept integration of unfolding story elements into coherent narratives. This approach not only offers readers a more

authentic and comprehensive view of events but also reinforces the journalists' commitment to ethical storytelling and practical transparency. Long story put short: The Bishop case discloses transparency in action, triggered by serendipity in real-life newswriting.

An extreme Type II case: Leba

a **Journalist**: R.G., born in 1959, acquired a degree in modern languages, took a 6-month trip around the world and produced short films for the television travel show Trip around the World. He completed a 2-year program in journalism and worked as a journalist at Radio Suisse Romande, the French-speaking public service radio station in Switzerland, for twenty years. On the side, he helped set up an agency and produced foreign television reportages for it. R.G. still travels a lot, for instance, to Lebanon. At the time of data collection, he had been working for 2 years as a foreign affairs journalist at Téléjournal, which is the newscast of Télévision Suisse Romande, the French-speaking public service TV station in Switzerland.

b **Workplace**: R.G. says that the Téléjournal should answer its viewers' questions about what has happened each day in Switzerland and the rest of the world. The editorial board decides on the topics, but then the journalists are free to design the news items as they see fit. As broad an audience as possible should be able and want to understand the news items. Focus and perspective are important for the viewers, not the amount of information: too much information could overload them. It is an advantage to be familiar with a region and to be able to evaluate its topics and spokespersons from one's own viewpoint. According to R.G., this type of experience is also appreciated by the editorial board.

c **Production patterns**: R.G. says that he reads international media, which provides him with ideas for topics and perspectives. At the same time, he rummages around in his memories. Sometimes, while reading in a café, he jots down a couple of lines on paper which then become the key sentences in the news item that he later writes on the computer. When he goes to the video editing room, he says, he mostly has a very clear idea of how he wants to organize the information; the content of the item hardly ever change there. However, he often shortens and condenses the text to suit the images. What matters is to 'be as fair as possible in describing the situation, yet go beyond just the statistics and the outcome'.

d **Collaboration patterns**: R.G. says that he likes working with video editors and that their opinions interest him, such as how to close a story: it has to fit but should also be elegantly formulated. Besides including the information he wants to convey, R.G. tries to tell stories with an elegant ending. If a video editor says she finds the conclusion 'a bit sweet', he knows that he has gone too far. In addition to interactions with the video editor and the anchor, R.G. also collaborates with people more distant from the writing process. For example, R.G. has personal contacts from his travels that he can draw on to get impressions from locals, such as, demonstrators.

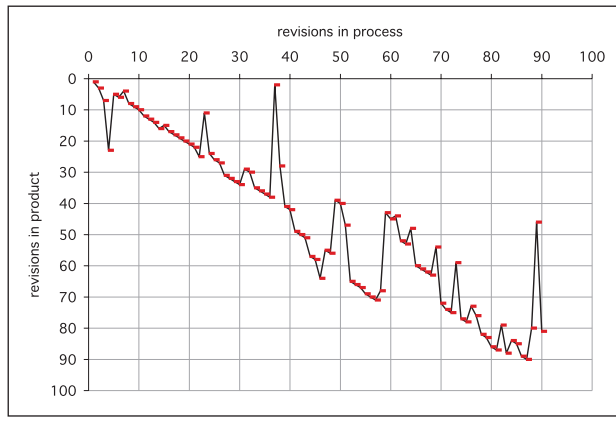

Figure 2. Text progression from the LEBA case. Source: tsr_tj_070214_1245_guillet_libanon_progress. Despite repeatedly checking for incoming news, R.G. writes his text in quite a linear way, starting with the introduction and ending with the conclusion. Considerable deviations from linear writing occur when R.G. repairs his text after a computer crash (revisions 38–57) and immediately after constructing the leitmotif (revision 23).

e **LEBA task**: At the 9:30 morning conference of the TÉLÉJOURNAL newsroom team R.G. receives the assignment to prepare an item about demonstrations in Lebanon for the noon edition of the TÉLÉJOURNAL. He finds the deadline tight, which helps make him concentrate on the main topic: tens of thousands of demonstrators from all over Lebanon streaming into Beirut on the second anniversary of the killing of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. They were protesting against the possibility of renewed civil war and, above all, Syria's influence. So far there had been no violence – however, after the two Syrian terror acts of the previous day, new violence was what demonstrators were afraid of, R.G. says.

f **Process**: At 10:40 a.m., R.G. starts his production process by collaborating with the video editor. Since he knows his way around Lebanon, he says he feels familiar with the topic. Moreover, he has received lots of new visual material – 2 hours of images from Lebanese TV, mostly crowds of people with placards. He decides not to start with pictures of the demonstration itself. Instead, he first shows masses of people arriving to demonstrate. While writing, R.G. keeps on checking for incoming news on his topic. He says that he wants to stay aware of the latest developments in Lebanon. After a computer crash that forced him to rewrite unsaved parts, R.G.'s writing process shows a more or less linear progression graph (Figure 2).

g **Product**: At the end of the production process, the news item was 80 seconds long and was broadcasted at 12:53 p.m. R.G. did the voiceover, and a female and a male speaker each read the translations of the quotations. Early in the item, a visual and verbal Leitmotiv appears which keeps on resonating throughout the rest of the piece (Figure 3):

016 Ils sont venus par la route
They have come by road

017 et même pour certains par la voie tranquille de la Méditerrané.
and some also by the tranquil path of the Mediterranean.

Figure 3. Extract of the French news item from the LEBA case, with English glosses. Translation: Daniel Perrin.

19{Ils sont venus p}19|20ar la route et même pour certains par la voie
20[express]20|2121{tranquille}21 de la Médit4[e|4]4érannée.....|5

Figure 4. Revisions from the LEBA case. For an explanation of S-notation see above, Section *Writing as a material activity*.

h **Focus of analysis**: The introductory scene shows how people traveled en masse to the demonstration in boats. Finding these boats in the video material surprised him, R.G. says. After a closer look at the pictures that were new to him, he then made a revision of a word that turned out to be the pivotal point of the whole writing process. R.G. had first talked about an expressway to describe the direct route over the Mediterranean Sea, 'la voie express de la méditerrannée'. While interweaving the text with the images, he realized that a tranquil path, 'la voie tranquille', would better fit the slow journey of a boat. So as a result, he deleted 'express' and inserted 'tranquille' instead (Figure 4).

With this revision, cued by new details and R.G.'s language awareness, the design of the item emerged: R.S. started combining strong symbols around *tranquil*. He said that he loves the adjective because it corresponds not only to the image of the boats but also to the tranquility of the demonstration. In the RVP, he hinted that he consciously had fostered conditions for serendipitous moments by the deliberate practice of browsing the footage with eyes wide open. The emergent outcome of this exposure helped him overcome the critical situation – just before getting stuck in the stereotype reproduced by most of his source materials.

i **Potential for knowledge transformation**: R.G. overcame the critical situation of using brash stereotypes when under time pressure. Instead of catering to the market and resorting to predictable images that could overshadow publicly relevant developments, he decided to apply a good practice from his repertoire. By both fostering and exploiting serendipity, he was able to discover a gentle access to the topic. This allowed him to produce a coherent and fresh story while reflecting the political finesse required by his media company's public service mandate, which is to provide accessible and educative news.

Conclusion: Serendipity and the future of human journalism

Why is this important? Of course, catching the momentum and finding the angle to write a really good story matters – good in terms of one's own expectations, but also those from the media organization, the profession, the audience, and society-at-large. Our data show how journalists benefit from serendipitous moments. By openly exposing themselves to the unexpected, they even foster conditions for serendipity to happen. Their practices, made available to others, can help overcome critical situations more systematically. An example is the Appetizers Technique.[4] It resulted from transdisciplinary newsroom research into cases such as Leba and Bishop.

But there is more. If we consider journalism a dynamic system in which pattern scale up and down, developing the ability to foster and exploit serendipity turns out to be a powerful tool to handle uncertainty on macro level, too, far beyond writing individual pieces. While technological developments such as the telegraph, the internet, social media, and generative artificial intelligence have thoroughly challenged journalism as a linear game of fixed routines, they offer categorically new opportunities for new forms of journalism. The solutions have been and will be found on higher levels, by forerunners, in serendipitous moments.

No, serendipity is not confined to ideation as the initial stage of the journalistic process. First, it can influence work at any stage of the newswriting process. Second, its consequences range from doing nothing to being saved. And third, it is bound to scale up as an opportunity to overcome the critical situation journalism finds itself in, with the tools like ChatGPT in an often-unpredictable world and its unexpected developments.

Of course, this relates the research into serendipity to that on learning and innovation (e.g., Porcu, 2020; Wagemans and Witschge, 2019), which presents a challenging dilemma: how to 'routinize the processing of unexpected events' (Tuchman, 1973: 111), while, at the same time, letting go of routines, as they represent 'an inventory of past learning' (Edmondson and Moingeon, 1996: 19).

To sum up: When the foreseeable forthcoming phases are bleak and gloomy because AI can predictably write all the predictable, formulaic texts automatically, it is about time we learnt and taught how to maintain a deep connection to the unpredictability of the real world – and shift horizons.

Notes

1. The word *serendipity* has an interesting and somewhat serendipitous history of its own. It was coined by the English author and politician Horace Walpole in a letter he wrote to a friend Horace Mann in 1754. In this letter, Walpole explained about 'a critical discovery' he had made, something that he would call 'serendipity'. As Walpole told Mann, 'you will understand it [the meaning of the word] better by the derivation than by the definition'. He then went on by referring to the happenstance of a Persian fairy tale called 'The Three Princes of Serendip' (*Serendip* being an old name for Sri Lanka). In the story, the three princes possess the remarkable ability to make accidental discoveries and solve problems through their sagacity and cleverness, often when they were not actively seeking answers. After this letter, there

is no record of any further appearance of this very word until in 1833 – after 70 years – when the edition of the correspondence between Walpole and Mann was published.

2. https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=serendipity. The source does not provide data newer than the year 2019 at the time of writing this paper.
3. https://flowision.fi/
4. The Appetizers Technique is explained from theoretical perspectives, for example, in Perrin (2013: 267). An easy access to applying it is offered through this YouTube channel: https://tinyurl.com/writers-toolbox

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Author biographies

Lauri Haapanen is Adjunct Professor and University Lecturer in Journalism Studies at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. With an academic background in linguistics and professional experience in journalism, he has extensively examined journalistic work, particularly from process-oriented and linguistic perspectives. He is also involved in research projects exploring the journalistic use of social media, personalization, and artificial intelligence. Currently, Haapanen serves as the editor-in-chief of *Media & viestintä*, a leading journal in media and communication research in Finland. For more information, visit www.laurihaapanen.fi.

Daniel Perrin is Professor of Applied Linguistics, Vice President at Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Past President of the International Association of Applied Linguistics AILA, as well as Editor of the International Journal of Applied Linguistics and the de Gruyter *Handbook of Applied Linguistics* series. His areas of research include media linguistics, methodology of applied linguistics, text production research, and analysis of language use in professional communication. For more information, visit www.danielperrin.net.