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Abstract

In the mid-19th century, a significant number of persons among the Finnish-speaking rural populace learned to read fluently and write for the first time. One of the first purposes to which Finnish-speakers could put their writing was letters to the press. This paper first provides a brief overview of how rural Finnish-speaking commoners acquired functional literacy. It then examines what letters to newspapers written by self-educated commoners reveal about writers' motives, the uses to which writing could be put in mid-19th century Finland, and the tensions which arose when newly literate commoners began to criticize their social superiors in the press and no longer needed their help in reading and writing.

Keywords: literacy, Finland, 19th-century, newspapers, the press, writing, social hierarchy, language rights, secularization

Laura Stark

The rise of Finnish-language popular literacy as viewed through rural correspondence to newspapers 1847 – 1870

In recent years a number of sources such as letters, diaries, autobiographies, poems, and handwritten newspapers have been uncovered in Finland which provide important insights into the writing activities of self-educated¹ farmers, crofters, tradesmen, artisans and labourers in the late 19th-century.² Very few examples of such writing exist from before the 1860s, however, because until that decade there were very few purposes to which a monolingual Finnish-speaker could put his or her writing skills. Finland had been ruled by Russia since 1809, and although Finnish was the native language of nearly 60 per cent of the urban population and nearly 90 per cent of the rural population, Swedish remained the dominant language of both administration and education, as well as the only official language in Finland until 1863. One of the most important catalysts for change in this regard was the rise of Finnish-language *newspapers*, a fact observed repeatedly in autobiographies written by men who had been young adults in the mid-19th century (Leino-Kaukiainen 1989:343; Stark 2006). Newspaper reading informed the public of vital social issues and stimulated people become better readers. Newspapers also introduced a wide range of secular literature, some of it translations of foreign short stories and novels. Starting in 1847, with the founding of the newspaper *Suometar*, Finnish-language newspapers also began to print letters written by rural readers.

In this paper I explore how and why rural self-educated writers began to write to newspapers; how editors used this opportunity to shape the world view of self-educated writers; and finally, the social tensions and conflicts that accompanied the entrance of

non-elite writers into the public sphere. I use as my source data Finnish-language newspapers which have been digitized by The National Library of Finland into a searchable database.³ I focus on the years 1847 – 1870, a period in which the press represented for Finnish-speakers the only forum for political and social debate outside of parish meetings. In Finland, the earliest mass civic movements such as the temperance and labor movements, and popular voluntary organizations such as youth and sports organizations were still roughly two decades away.

The struggle to attain functional literacy and the right to use it

Although the Lutheran Church in Finland had required its parishioners to learn to read since the 17th century, in most cases this seems to have meant only being able to sound out words by rote. In reading examinations (*kinkerit*) held once a year, children often needed only to be able to recognize passages from the Bible or Catechism. Many rural inhabitants could not read handwritten script, and others were unable to read print with any fluency or comprehension.⁴ One writer explained in 1861 that “[m]any here teach [...] their children to read in almost the same way as parrots are taught to speak in foreign lands. The mother first reads from memory what she herself learned from her mother, and the child imitates the same words after her...”⁵ Another writer to *Kansan Lehti* (*The People’s Newspaper*) in 1868 complained what a pity it was that great pains were taken for years to teach children to read long passages from Luther’s Catechism by having them recite loudly together in large groups, only to have it revealed on further inspection that the children had no understanding whatsoever of what they had just read, nor even any memory of the actual words.⁶ Yet another writer in the same year explained that many readers did not understand that writing was a record of speech, that “the writer of book actually speaks (in his thoughts) when he writes, and the reader who reads quietly to himself is listening to the writer’s speech [...]” The writer concluded that “[f]or this reason the common folk become exasperated with reading, which they don’t comprehend properly.”⁷ In writing of his experiences as a youth in the 1860s, farmer Frans Fredrik Björni (1850–1930) explained that it was only *after* rural inhabitants began reading newspapers that their reading abilities became more fluent (Tuominen 1986, 185).

The first official public schools were not founded in Finland until the mid-1860s, which meant that the small early cohort of literate rural commoners⁸ writing in the 1850s and 1860s were almost entirely self-educated, having attained literacy outside formal institutions of learning. Progress in learning to write throughout the nineteenth century was fairly slow, and as late as 1900, half of all Finns above the age of 15 still were unable to write (Makkonen 2002: 9). In the context of poverty and the unending agricultural labour needed to survive, self-educated rural inhabitants faced a number of obstacles to functional reading and writing, including lack of writing and reading materials, and lack of opportunities to practice writing in order to keep up the fine motor skills which were necessary for good penmanship (Stark 2008:53–54). The first self-educated writers in their parishes often encountered the scorn of family members and neighbors who valued physical labour and skill in handicraft, but saw reading and writing (which appeared from the outside to be mere idleness) as a foolish waste of time (Stark 2006; 2008).

Newspapers in particular were considered by many rural inhabitants to be a waste of money (e.g. Mikkola 2009).

Lack of full literacy among rural commoners created a vast informational divide between them and members of the higher Estates (clergy, merchants, and aristocracy), all of whom were functionally literate (Stark 2006; Mäkinen 2007). Ilkka Mäkinen has rightly pointed out that the gap in literacy skills between elites and commoners is attributable to the privileges enjoyed by the former, rather than to differences in language rights between Swedish and Finnish speakers. However, it was the struggle for linguistic rights which began to close this gap, by spurring the rise of the Finnish-language press in the mid-19th century. The Finnish-language press, in turn, provided one of the first real uses to which Finnish-speaking commoners could put their writing skills. Whereas it took 40 years for just thirteen Finnish-language newspapers to be founded between 1820 and 1860, fifteen new newspapers appeared in only nine years between 1861 and 1869. The reason for this was the Finnish Diet or Assembly of the Estates, which up to that time had not convened for 54 years. In 1861, news spread that Czar Alexander II would allow it to convene in 1863. This news had a galvanizing effect on Finnish-language activists, who saw their chance to lobby for the rights of Finnish-speakers. Finnish-language newspapers intensified their efforts to develop Finnish-language and literature, fight for Finnish-language schools, and narrow the gap between the power elites (most of whom were proficient in Swedish), and the uneducated masses (most of whom were monolingual Finnish speakers).

Writers to the press pointed out that those who lacked the ability to read and write fluently were dependent upon scribes or literate neighbors when they wanted to write letters, and had to turn to the parish cantor when they wanted to read the letters sent to them. One writer to the government-sponsored newspaper *Suomen Julkisia Sanomia* told readers in 1857 that for those who wanted to write to distant family members or loved ones, if they were unable to write, then

[y]ou must trust in the pen of a stranger, let another assist you, to whom you end up revealing your domestic relations and much that you would not like your neighbors to know. The scribe writes down briefly and brusquely what you would prefer to have told at greater length and with more affection to your absent loved one; or if you receive a letter from the family member you miss, or from your lawyer, you dare not even break its seal, for fear that it belongs to another, and even if you open it, you must again trust in other persons, since you yourself are unable to read what is written.⁹

Descriptions in the press written in the 1850s by educated men with roots in the Finnish-speaking countryside make it clear that by the mid-19th century, landowning farmers, whose legal and economic responsibilities to the Crown were increasing, were at a particular disadvantage without functional literacy. Antero Varelius, son of a farmer, argued in the newspaper *Sanomia Turusta* that farmers needed to keep records pertaining to the running of the farm, especially since they had cottagers and tenant farmers to

whom they gave foodstuffs in return for day-labour on the farm, and that by writing letters or invitations they could save themselves the time and trouble of visiting and notifying people in person. Furthermore, argued Varelius, using scribes was expensive: “we have seen that for the writing of even a short letter, a scribe must be paid as much as a farmer makes in a week.”¹⁰ Yrjö Koskinen, Fennoman-minded university student and son of a rural vicar, pointed out in *Suometar* in 1855 that without the ability to write and read fluently, farmers could not be elected or chosen for public duties in their parish because these duties required them to read and produce official documents: “[i]f, for example, a farmer is chosen to be a churchwarden, then he must hire someone to write for him, which soon uses up his entire salary.”¹¹ On the other hand, Koskinen continued, writing ability alone often was not enough:

But there is another thing which makes it difficult for landowning peasants to participate in the parish’s public affairs: everything that is written concerning them, accounts, minutes, records, and so forth are written in Swedish, and peasants only receive this information through verbal translation; then they draw their owner’s mark¹² (Swed. *bomärke*, Finn. *puumerkki*) underneath what is written in a foreign language.¹³

Rural inhabitants needed situations in which writing represented the transmission of information useful for daily life, and that meant being legally allowed to write documents in Finnish. As long as most local official matters were carried out in Swedish, it was clear to Finnish-speaking rural inhabitants that the ability to write could not represent a form of social capital for them. Farmhand and later farm master Zefanias Suutarla (1834–1908), referring to himself in his autobiography below in the third person as ‘Vani’, recalled how, when he was a youth at the beginning of the 1850s, he had wondered what possible use learning to write could be to him:

He grew older, his reading ability became more confident, and his world view broadened. In addition, there grew in Vani a desire to learn and gain knowledge. His ability to write had developed to the point that it produced a somewhat legible handwriting. But to what purpose? Vani could find no answer to that. Writing could be of no practical use to a Finnish speaker, since – as it appeared then – not a single meagre document could be written in Finnish (Suutarla 1898, 16).

Although commoners writing to the press generally did not question the social privileges based on the hierarchy of social Estates, the rise of the Finnish-language press gave rural writers their first chance to demand rights *for Finnish-language speakers*, and to protest against the *excesses* of the hierarchical Estate system.

The rise of the Finnish-language press and editors as gatekeepers to the press

By the mid-19th century, it had become clear to editors that in order for Finnish-language newspapers to survive financially, they needed to increase their number of rural

uneducated subscribers. The reason for this was simple economics: the elite read Swedish newspapers, but the untapped readership lay in the Finnish-speakers of the countryside, who made up over 85% of the country's total population. The first newspaper to gain a relatively broad readership among rural inhabitants was *Maamiehen Ystävä* (*Farmer's Friend*) in 1844, which concentrated on practical advice to rural inhabitants.

The subscription rates for Finnish-language newspapers remained low throughout the last half of the 19th century. For instance, *Maamiehen Ystävä* had only 900-1000 subscribers in its most successful years, 1844 and 1845 (Tommila 1988:159). The sale of newspapers is not a reliable measure of their social impact. It was typical in this period for rural persons to read newspapers aloud to groups of persons, for wealthier farmers to lend their newspapers to other households, and for groups to pool their money and jointly subscribe to newspapers.¹⁴ Folklorist Kirsti Salmi-Niklander has described a case from the Häme region in which a group of 36 farmers, farm wives, serving maids and farm hands not only pooled their money to subscribe to newspapers but came together as a reading group in 1862 (Salmi-Niklander 2006:171).

While *Maamiehen Ystävä* was oriented toward rural inhabitants and strove to educate and enlighten them using language they could understand (see Stark 2011:43-45), *Suometar*, which appeared in 1847, was explicitly oriented toward a more elite and educated Finnish-speaking audience (Tommila 1988:164). However, the need to boost its circulation caused *Suometar* to actively request local news and opinions from rural correspondents (Tommila 1988:166-167). In the 1850s, roughly 60 per cent of those who submitted letters to *Suometar* were educated writers, clergymen, schoolteachers, and cantors, while 40 per cent were self-educated landowning peasants. In the early years of the 1860s, the proportion of writers who were landowning peasants grew (Tommila 1988:202). Historian Päiviö Tommila (1988:201) estimates the total number of rural correspondents to all newspapers in the period 1847–1865 to have been at least 2200.

Newspapers encouraged readers to submit local news for several reasons. Written submissions from readers increased the amount of material for publication, which was important since most newspapers had only one editor for whom the newspaper was a side activity carried out in addition to his regular job. Rural correspondence letters also brought newspapers closer to the interests of rural inhabitants and motivating them to subscribe, as one rural correspondent from southeastern Finland explained in 1867:

Submissions to the press by farmers and the rural folk have been of great benefit to [...] the survival and vitality of newspapers themselves. In many places, newspapers are considered to be of no practical use, but if a neighbor who has subscribed to newspapers happens to write to them of the conditions and activities in his own district, [...] then another neighbor notices that the opinions of the first have come out in print, and if he himself happens to know how to write, then he soon decides: I should subscribe to newspapers too, so that I can tell the public my thoughts in the same manner and in that way participate in all the general discussions and get to know the thoughts and opinions of more knowledgeable citizens. Once he receives this knowledge, a second and third person want to read

what that neighbor over there has written, and in that way they finally themselves begin to subscribe to newspapers.¹⁵

Some rural writers made it clear that what interested them most in newspapers were letters sent by other rural readers.¹⁶ In 1863, one rural reader of *Sanomia Turusta* wrote to complain about the fact that the newspaper filled its columns with advertisements and announcements pertaining only to the city of Turku, all of which were uninteresting to rural readers, while not printing enough letters sent from the countryside, which would be “much more fun to read.”¹⁷ The new editor of the newspaper, 26-year-old Johan Aulén,¹⁸ responded by writing that rural readers comprised only a small fraction of the readership of *Sanomia Turusta*. A week later, he added that many letters from rural writers were so incomprehensible that they could not be printed, even going so far as to provide an example of such a letter from a factory worker.¹⁹

As Aulén’s response indicates, one of the most time-consuming tasks for editors was the rewriting of submissions sent by uneducated writers to make them suitable for publication. Although only a small number of the original letters written by rural correspondents survive,²⁰ it is clear even from these what a formidable task faced editors assisting writers whose handwriting was barely legible, who had only a hazy understanding of punctuation, and whose sentences were strung together in a manner barely intelligible to others. Cover letters accompanying newspaper submissions reveal that some writers requested corrections and improvements to the letters and essays in advance and afterward expressed their gratitude for the proofreading.

Although in the 1850s, submissions from commoners were still so few that editors made the effort to thank their readers who had written to the press, by the early 1860s, rural correspondents were so active in submitting letters and essays to the press that editors began to encourage writers to confine themselves to reporting on the events in their own parish.²¹ Editors could now choose the best written and most informative submissions for publication, and newspapers began publishing regular notices of rejection and acceptance in brief messages under the heading of “Correspondence (*Kirjeenvaihto*)”. These notices indicate that some submissions were rejected due to their subject matter, which was considered too provocative for government censorship. Some were rejected because they were considered likely to lead to libel suits or to not be of interest to the general public, while others were rejected because the editors suspected they had been written by someone other than the stated author. Finally, some submissions were apparently so incoherent that the editors did not even attempt to edit or correct them:

[Tapio 1862:] *To A–t in Rautalampi. Tapio would have gladly published your story, especially since you say that it was your first attempt, but your letter does not have anything to say other than criticisms against an official, for which you have not provided sufficient justification. If you want to prove your accusations, they must be based on concrete events, not on supposition or the dissatisfaction of others; and besides, in such matters it is mandatory that a man makes his name public, at least to the editorial board. [...]*²²

[Päivätär 1865:] *To D. M! Both of the letters you sent are of the sort that they cannot be published unless they are completely rewritten; but this would hardly be worth the trouble. What is more, what you said in defence of the poor being forced to work for others, and your opposition to the empowerment of the people and of women, do not suit the purpose of our newspaper.*

*To I. H. in Kihitelysvaara! We do not understand the content of your submission at all, and presumably nobody else would have understood it either.*²³

Although letters to the press were modified by editors before they went to print, the written interaction between newspaper editors and self-educated writers provides important insights into how the rise of popular literacy was used by editors to influence the values, attitudes and thinking of rural commoners. First, just by setting aside column space for rural correspondence under the heading "Maaseutu (From the Countryside)" or "Kotimaa (Domestic)" and publishing letters from several parishes within the same discursive space in each issue, newspaper editors set up a forum in which it became possible for readers who had never travelled far from home to begin to imagine separate Finnish-speaking locales as collectively comprising a larger Finnish 'nation' (cf. Anderson 1983). By encouraging a process of mental nation-building 'from below', editors made it possible for readers to imagine how people in other localities might view their own home parish, which increased efforts toward community improvement.

Second, although editors wanted to encourage rural writers in their efforts to write, they also had definite ideas – guided by a firm belief in the possibility of social progress and individual improvement – about what kinds of texts were useful for the public to read. In a press devoted to the question of how to create an improved society, one debate that was never far from the surface was the question of whether social and individual progress should be viewed from a purely religious perspective – with fear of God and obedience to worldly authority as the ideal – or from a primarily secular perspective, in which scientific and material progress became the ideal. By the early 1860s, nearly all editors had opted for the latter stance, and were suppressing – or openly criticizing – letters from the countryside which were religiously conservative in outlook. One writer who had tried without success to have his ideas about Christian education published in the press complained vigorously in 1868 that

...regardless of how they boast that through their newspapers they give the public a free space in which each can speak his mind, nonetheless this freedom has always been denied me [...] each newspaper editor opens a space for public deliberation only as wide as corresponds to his own state of mind, but if it goes against him, then the freedom disappears, so that newspaper editors set themselves up to be the Pope, and demand that the people be forced like slaves to believe what they say without the possibility of contradicting them.²⁴

The newspaper in which this complaint was printed, the short-lived *Kansan Lehti* (*People's Newspaper*) was the only newspaper of its time which refused to edit rural correspondence letters, and only rejected those letters which made personal accusations against individuals.²⁵ *Kansan Lehti* also diverged from the mainstream in another sense: it was self-consciously and deliberately religious in content and tone. Its religious outlook and lack of editorial interference apparently fostered in its correspondents the sense that they were participants in an open public discussion which resembled a Pietist fellowship of equals, and they routinely referred to each other as 'brothers' and 'sisters'. When *Kansan Lehti* announced at the end of 1870 that it would soon stop publishing, one writer explained that *Kansan Lehti* had been loved by its readers and writers because of the freedom it gave Finnish-speaking commoners to express their ideas and opinions in their own words.²⁶ One year earlier, when *Kansan Lehti* had been criticized by the Helsinki newspaper *Uusi Suometar* for being full of worthless letters from the countryside, one correspondent to *Kansan Lehti* had responded that: "in [*Kansan Lehti*] the common people speak to the common people" and added that the common people preferred reading what each other had written rather than reading something by a "stranger" and concluded that "through [these letters] we learn to know each other".²⁷

Elites' disapproval of commoners' use of writing

As increasing numbers of rural inhabitants began to learn to write and Finnish-language newspapers provided these writers with a forum in which to demonstrate this ability, questions began to be raised over whether peasant farmers actually needed to learn to write. Editors and some educated writers argued that farmers needed to write in order to occupy roles of responsibility and decision-making available to Finnish-speakers within the parish such as sextons, church wardens, and jurymen. Moreover, some things could be written in Finnish if only a farmer had the ability: these included simple contracts, petitions, promissory notes, and household accounts. One of the most commonly mentioned purposes for writing was to make notes in the *päästökirja* booklets which became legally required after 1865 and which provided farm servants with proof of work experience, references to future employers, and salary receipts all rolled into one.²⁸ One young man writing to *Hämäläinen* in 1861 even wrote that young women needed to improve their writing skills so that instead of the jumbled and obscure love letters to which they usually turned their writing skills, they could use writing to keep accounts of the sale of dairy products and to write *päästökirjat* for their serving maids. By doing so, they could avoid having to "travel back and forth the whole day long to see secretaries and inspectors..."²⁹ Some writers argued further that spending time in practicing one's reading and writing skills was a more useful and morally uplifting activity than drinking, gambling, dancing, and other morally questionable leisure-time activities in which the youth participated.³⁰

But there were also those who disapproved of commoners using literacy to the same extent as their social superiors (Mäkinen 2007). In one letter written in 1864 to *Tapio*, a farmer signing himself "F- k. H-nen" accused the deacon and assistant parson of his parish of having criticized him for writing letters too often, and for saying that it

was not necessary for farmers to use literacy for “useless” activities (Mäkinen 2007).³¹ The debate which ensued reflects above all the different attitudes taken toward the social transformations occurring in mid-19th-century Finland which were threatening to narrow the gap between the common folk and members of the higher estates (Stark 2006; Mäkinen 2007). The editor who accepted “F–k. H–nen’s” letter for publication was Antti Manninen, himself the self-educated son of a farmer who, among his many other accomplishments, had been the first member of the landowning peasant class to publish a book in the Finnish language in 1856, in which he explained the usefulness of writing for farmers, among other things (Stark 2011:66). Manninen seized the opportunity provided by “F–k. H–nen’s” letter to argue that any attempts by privileged elites to keep commoners ignorant should be condemned as ‘old fashioned’:

[...] there are still many gentlemen to be found who are averse to our farmers having such a necessary and innocent knowledge as the ability to write, not to mention other enlightenment and wisdom. They even go so far as to consider the farmer who knows how to write and even how to think in some small measure as completely corrupted; but on the contrary they say of a man who knows nothing and walks about with his hair sticking out in all directions and with a piece of string for a belt: “that’s a real farmer”. But these gentlemen forget that we are living already in the second half of the 19th century, when antiquated beings (*entistä olijoina*) are not held in much esteem.”³²

To depict conservatives who resisted the forces of change as ‘old timers’ (*vanhalla olija*) was a typical rhetorical device in the progressive Fennoman press: such individuals were acting in opposition to the ‘natural’ forces of enlightenment and civic nation-building and would be consigned to oblivion (cf. Mikkola 2009). Another man writing to *Tapio* in 1864 used metaphors from nature and Scripture to depict the same notion of an inexorable march of progress in which commoners could imagine their own social advancement for the first time:

...certain educated persons are beginning to tread [on self-educated writers to the press], even publicly, thinking that in this way they will crush the sprouting seed [...]. But this seed is now difficult to destroy. Once a seed has sprouted and grown to the extent that it begins to proliferate, then it is useless for the aforementioned persons, try as they might, to grind it underfoot.³³

The deacon whom “F–k. H–nen” had originally accused responded one month later in the pages of *Tapio*, arguing that “F–k. H–nen” had gone too far in criticizing the clergyman who was his “teacher” and reminding him of the old proverb: “Cobbler, stick to thy last [=do not presume to address matters beyond your competence]”.³⁴ His letter reveals a number of assumptions regarding farmers who regularly practiced their writing ability, such as that “a farmer who truly cultivates his land will never ever make a living from the useless stories he sends to newspapers”, and “even a fool can guess that nobody can learn to write very quickly in only two or three years.” The deacon also claimed that

“experience and observation have shown that where landowning peasants have begun to use writing for purposes other than what is absolutely necessary, they have ended up in poverty.” To this letter Manninen again added his criticism of such views:

Editorial reminder: [...] We cannot agree with the honorable writer’s notion that in taking care of his affairs, a farmer would not be allowed to write and send even 40 letters at a time. Is it better and easier if he himself travels back and forth in order to deal with his affairs in person, which takes up much more time? We therefore consider the honorable writer’s opinion in this matter [...] to be very old-fashioned...³⁵

Six weeks later, two farmers responding to the deacon’s letter seem to have been especially critical of its implicit suggestion that farmers should remain in their place and not become ‘half-gentlemen’, that is, commoners who had acquired some of the attributes of elites and were therefore seen to be rejecting their proper station in life. Since they represented a hybrid form of identity which threatened the status quo, ‘half-gentlemen’ were repeatedly criticized in the 19th-century press as being worse than either pure commoners or pure gentlesfolk. The two farmers responding to the deacon, however, viewed the matter in a different light:

...It echoes in our ears as if the honorable J. L. had said [...] “Do not desire greater knowledge, for you do not need it; you will never become completely civilized. [...] To our minds, it is better to be half-civilized than completely barbarous, for there is always hope that a half-civilized person can become fully civilized.

Referring to the deacon’s statement that “nobody can learn to write very quickly in just two or three years”, the two farmers responded:

In our country there are many landowning peasants who, without having attended any school at all, have learned to write Finnish much more fluently than many gentlemen who received their education in a foreign language [...] we would like to remind the honorable J. L. to abandon these old-fashioned ideas about us farmers, for they do not suit our times...³⁶

As the ability to write became more common among self-educated farmers and crofters, educated clerks and scribes who had formerly earned money by drawing up contracts and other documents for the unlettered rural masses now began to resent the fact that some farmers no longer needed their assistance. Moreover, some farmers had begun to demand that clerks and scribes write documents in Finnish rather than the Swedish in which the latter had been educated. One man describing himself as a minor local official described how these demands were perceived by the rural elite. In a letter sent to *Tapio* in 1862, he portrayed an evening conversation on the topic of newspapers between himself, a provost, a bridge bailiff, a rural police chief, and an assistant vicar. Those present complained that newspapers spread news to the common people of political strife and

opposition within the Finnish Diet, and that “wrong-minded and harmful ideas should not allowed to be printed in newspapers”:

The bridge bailiff [said] that to his disgust he had seen how some cottagers and other ignorant peons had begun in the newspapers to call his worthy men “small-minded clerks” and had asked that Finnish-language documents be accepted in the courts. “I”, he said, “have until now been allowed to write a number of promissory notes and statements as well as many other documents in fluent Swedish: for which I have sometimes accepted twenty kopecks, sometimes a ruble, sometimes less, but it has been the best form of income for me and my family. It doesn’t require much work, rather, “what costs is the know-how”, as the saying goes. I’ve decided that the freedom of the press [...] is a dangerous thing.”³⁷

Even if the conversation described above may not have actually taken place, it nevertheless represents a form of realistic ethnographic fiction used to portray prevailing attitudes in the author’s home locale. Ethnographic fiction, when written by a member of the culture it describes, can provide unique insights into the social dynamics of the culture in question (Apo 2001:18). *Tapio*’s editor Manninen seems to have understood the story as fiction, but added that he had printed it because he felt it contained “as much truth as innocent amusement”.³⁸

In 1851, Antero Varelius had warned that any time two Finnish-speaking men commissioned a scribe to write up a contract or promissory note between them, the fact that they were unable to read it because it was in Swedish was likely to cause confusion, errors and even quarrels.³⁹ As commoners began to use their own writing skills to write official documents, however, elites began turn this argument around and criticize the inferior writing of commoners as well as the confusion it caused in the courts. This was expressed in the following letter sent to *Sanomia Turusta* by a man signing himself “T.W.” in 1858:

It is a well-known fact that a few farmers, tailors and cobblers, who have learned to scrawl their ABCs and name on a piece of paper, consider themselves to already be accomplished not only in the writing and sending of their meagre letters, but they also boast that they know how to keep [records of] auctions, estate inventories, and accounts as well as do scribes and clerks, and they say that they do the same jobs as those entrusted to gentlemen, for a much smaller fee than gentlemen usually command. The usual consequence of this is that these idle boasters have begun these jobs defiantly, but quarrels and court trials and the assistance of officials have usually not sufficed to make sense of [the resulting documents], which has, of course, frustrated those involved, but at that point nothing can be done. The old Latin proverb, “Ne sutor ultra crepidam” which means, “cobbler, stick to your last”, applies well to these petty clerks. Stay in the occupation you are in, and do not fly higher than your wings can carry you, otherwise you will [have a great fall] and be corrupted. Their writings are like worthless boots which cannot be improved even

by patching them. And even if one can make sense of their writings, this usually requires more work than simply having them rewritten.⁴⁰

Farmers, however, suspected that clerks and scribes simply did not want to lose the extra income derived from their monopoly on the ability to write official documents. As one writer signing himself “Young man from Tammela parish” wrote to *Sanomia Turusta* in 1859,

[i]f some young man has learned to wield his pen well enough to write his servants’ *päästökirjat* himself, then there are those old men who envy him on account of the few copecks which no longer come to their pockets because of it.⁴¹

In the mid-1850s during the Crimean War, the strict government censorship of the press began to ease. By 1860, the press was enjoying freedoms not experienced for a decade (Tommila 1988; 178-183). Self-educated commoners began to use their new-found public voice to complain about the wrongdoing of rural elites and to bring their local power struggles into the public limelight (see Stark 2011: 55-59). For example, the aforementioned deacon criticized by “F-k. H-nen” expressed his indignation over the fact that if local elites offended literate commoners in any way, they could now find themselves written about in the press:

... these [half-gentlemen] require nothing more than the merest provocation before they get highly offended and proclaim in the press then and there that they have been criticized for their abilities. It is not enough that F-k H-nen wrote so arrogantly, another writer L. H. in [*Tapio*’s issue] N:o 17 stepped forward to defend him [...]

Due to the fact that rural writers nearly always used pseudonyms or signed themselves with only their initials, local rural elites rightly feared that slanderous accusations could be made with impunity against them in the press on the merest of evidence – or even in retaliation for some perceived slight. According to Finnish historian Ilkka Mäkinen (2007:412–413), when the common people began to send their writings to national and regional newspapers, they did more than just broaden the scope of public discussion, they made the activities of the local elites subject to a new kind of surveillance, which the elites did not necessarily welcome. Previously,

[b]oth the Swedish language and the ability to write had been [...] the secure ‘firewall’ of the gentry, within which they could speak and communicate freely [...] But now there began to be eyes and ears in the countryside which brought to public attention those things which had previously remained secure within a small circle (Mäkinen 2007:412).

In the aforementioned letter written to *Tapio* describing an evening conversation among local elites, the provost explained how he feared the new freedom of the press because it gave literate commoners the opportunity to publicly criticize their social superiors:

‘I thank my good fortune’, said the provost, “that sensible and level-headed men can be found in my parish [...] An honest man who carries out his official duties according to the law could, through the writings of some scoundrel, lose his honor completely in the eyes of the public. I, for example – here he stood up and began to pace back and forth across the floor – I have tried to the best of my ability and powers to monitor the affairs of our parish; now some rascal who is angry with me might write: “our provost is lazy, he does nothing except eat and sleep, for that reason he is so fat that he cannot even reach to shake people’s hands’, or he could, in addition, write that I am a drunkard and that my shiny red nose clearly proves it. Should I start a war of words with such a person, seek proof from my deceased mother, who always said that from childhood I was as fat and round as a suckling pig, or should I attach to my answer a statement from the doctor which would prove that my nose was frostbitten on my last rounds to examine reading ability in the parish? Nobody can demand from me, who has more important things to do, such unnecessary explanations! No, our common people are not yet civilized enough to use freedom of the press wisely or in moderation.

Rural commoners could use the press as a weapon in local power struggles with elites, but if they were identified, especially landless men such as crofters and labourers ran great risks in publishing their opinions. For instance in 1861, a man signing himself “Serkkes Syrjäläinen” from Tohmajärvi wrote to *Suometar*’s editor Paavo Tikkanen explaining that because of the furor caused by his last letter of correspondence,⁴² he had been “subjected to the terrible fury of those who hold my entire worldly happiness in their hands” and had been forced by these more powerful individuals to write a public apology, which he hoped would be printed in *Suometar*.⁴³ Crofter’s son Kalle Eskola (1865–1938) described in his autobiography how when he was seventeen years old and his letters of rural correspondence were published in newspapers in the 1880s, the lord of the local manor furiously told him to stop reporting local affairs to the newspapers or he would evict Eskola’s family from their croft (Stark 2006).

Conclusion

While letters from readers published in newspapers are not a reliable source of numerical data on the rise of literacy in rural 19th-century Finland, what they do provide is important information on the motives, perceptions and experiences of commoners who wrote to the press. They reveal that literacy was not used by rural writers solely as an extension of memory, to construct an autobiographical sense of self or to maintain social networks through letter-writing. Writing was also used to expand the individual’s ability to communicate across space and time through participating in broader forums of discussion and debate (much as the Internet is used today), to save time and money in everyday life, and to challenge the arbitrary use of power by local elites.

The acquisition of literacy is never a politically-neutral act. Reading, writing and other forms of learning began in the mid-19th century to undermine the advantages

enjoyed by educated Swedish-speakers and elites, and thus to gradually weaken the Estate system. Newspapers gave rural commoners a venue through which to express their opinions and publicly object to elites' misuse of power. At the same time, newspapers also brought self-educated Finnish speakers into a dialogue with Fennoman-minded editors who strove to shape their views regarding what kind of society was desirable. The catalyst for both of these processes was the disparity in power which prevailed between Finnish-speakers and Swedish-speakers. Without this 'language question', editors may not have found the writings of self-educated Finnish speakers as politically useful as they did. Paradoxically, therefore, it may be their relative disempowerment that explains why the voices of so many self-educated Finns have been preserved for posterity in letters to the press.

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¹ The term 'self-educated' covers a wide range of persons who obtained literacy outside formal educational institutions. Some had learned the basics of writing from other commoners, others in informal Sunday schools organized by manor lords, factory owners, young gentlewomen (see Makkonen 2002:184–185; Stark 2008).

² See e.g. Makkonen 2002; Nordlund 2005; Salmi-Niklander 2006; Kauranen 2007.

³ <http://digi.lib.helsinki.fi/sanomalehti/secure/main.html>.

⁴ Nordlund 2005; Häggman 2007; Leino-Kaukiainen 2007; Mäkinen 2007.

⁵ 11.10. 1861. *Hämäläinen* no. 41, "Sahalahdelta" (Kalle Kallenpoika Kallioinen, turvaton itsellismies).

⁶ April 25, 1868. *Kansan Lehti* no. 17, "Eikö jo olisi aika jättää hyödytöntä ulko-lukua?" (–ff–).

⁷ Dec. 5, 1868. *Kansan Lehti* no. 49, "Helsingistä" (Weikko).

⁸ The terms 'commoner' and 'common folk' are used in this study to refer to those individuals who had to perform physical labour for a living, either in agriculture or skilled craftsmanship.

⁹ June 22, 1857. *Suomen Julkisia Sanomia* no. 45, "Kirjoitustaidosta". See also: Dec. 22, 1855. *Oulun Wiikko-Sanomia* no. 51, "Kansan kouluista"; Nov. 18, 1865, *Päivätär* no. 45, "Tawoista ja elämästä Hölmölässä".

¹⁰ March 4, 1851. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 5 "Pellonviljeliäin kirjoitustaidosta" (A.W.) [=Antero Warelus]. Antero Warelus (1821-1904), who had received a university education, was the Finnish-speaking son of a farmer.

¹¹ July 6, 1855. *Suometar* no. 27, "Hämeenkyröstä" (Y.K.).

¹² An owner's mark was a symbol used by those persons who could not write their name to sign documents.

¹³ July 6, 1855. *Suometar* no. 27, "Hämeenkyröstä" (Y.K.).

¹⁴ Tommila 1988:238-239; Mäkinen 2007; Stark 2006b; Mikkola 2005, 2006.

¹⁵ April 5, 1867. *Ilmarinen* no. 14, "Wirolahdelta" (J. –i.).

¹⁶ See also: June 8, 1860. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 23, "Wastinetta Kokemäen pojalle" (Euran tyttö).

¹⁷ May 8, 1863. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 19, "Maalaisten puhe Turun Sanomista" (Punkalaitumelta Läntinen).

¹⁸ Aulén (1837-1906) was a former telegraph clerk who served as the editor of *Sanomia Turusta* for only one year.

¹⁹ May 15, 1863. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 20, "Edellisessä numerossamme..."

²⁰ All of these letters were sent to *Suometar*'s editor Paavo Tikkanen (1823-1873), who was university-educated and the Finnish-speaking son of a farmer. The letters, of which at least nineteen examples exist, were sent to Tikkanen from throughout Finland and are housed in the Finnish Literature Society Literature Archives in Helsinki.

²¹ March 29, 1862. *Tapio* no. 13, "Kirjeenvaihto".

²² March 29, 1862. *Tapio* no. 13, "Kirjevaihtoa".

²³ May 6, 1865. *Päivätär* no. 17, "Kirjevaihto".

²⁴ December 5, 1868. *Kansan Lehti* no. 49, "Rautalammilta" (A. H–nen).

²⁵ The editor of *Kansan Lehti* was medical doctor and ardent Fennoman Wolmar Schildt (who often used the Finnish-sounding surname Kilpinen).

²⁶ Dec. 24, 1870. *Kansan Lehti* no. 51, "Hyvästi jättö weikoille ja siskoille" (J. H–n).

²⁷ Dec. 11, 1869. *Kansan Lehti* no. 49, "Puolustusta Kansan Lehdelle" (– ff –).

²⁸ March 4, 1851. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 5 "Pellonviljeliäin kirjoitustaidosta" (A.W.) [=Antero Warelus]; June 22, 1857. *Suomen Julkisia Sanomia* no. 45, "Kirjoitustaidosta".

²⁹ June 21, 1861. *Hämäläinen* no. 25, "Tyttöimme kirjoitustaidon nykyinen laita" (A. H., poika).

³⁰ November 17, 1860. *Oulun Wiikko-Sanomia* no. 46. "Saloisista" (Heikki Saloisista); July 2, 1864. *Tapio* no. 27, "Wähänen arwostelua herra J. L. wastine kirjoituksesta Tapion 20 numerossa" (H. R – n.).

³¹ April 16, 1864. *Tapio* no. 16, "Onko talonpojalle kirjoitus-taidosta mitään hyötyä?" (F–k. H–nen.)

³² April 16, 1864. *Tapio* no. 16, "Onko talonpojalle kirjoitustaidosta mitään hyötyä?"

³³ July 23, 1864. *Tapio* no. 30, "Kunnallisista asioista" (R-nen.).

³⁴ May 14, 1864. *Tapio* no. 20, "Wähän wastausta: Onko talonpojalle kirjoitus-taidosta mitään hyötyä?" (J. L.).

³⁵ May 14, 1864. *Tapio* no. 20, "Wähän wastausta: Onko talonpojalle kirjoitus-taidosta mitään hyötyä?" (J. L.).

³⁶ July 2, 1864. *Tapio* no. 27, "Wähänen arwostelua herra J. L. wastine kirjoituksesta Tapion 20 numerossa" (H. R – n.).

³⁷ March 22, 1862. *Tapio* no. 12, "Kaukalasta kirje Wastaselle" (Heikki Hiljanen).

³⁸ March 22, 1862. *Tapio* no. 12, "Kaukalasta kirje Wastaselle" (Heikki Hiljanen).

³⁹ March 4, 1851. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 5 "Pellonviljeliän kirjoitustaidosta" (A.W.) [=Antero Warelius].

⁴⁰ June 29, 1858. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 26, "Kelwottomista töistä" (T. W.).

⁴¹ October 11, 1859. *Sanomia Turusta* no. 41, "Tammelasta" (Nuori Tammelan mies).

⁴² The writer calling himself "Serkses Syrjäläinen", which was almost certainly a pseudonym, had insinuated in his letter that the new female instructor of cattle husbandry chosen by the board of the Jouhkola Agricultural Institute had dishonored herself in some way (26.4.1861. *Suometar* no. 17, p. 3-4, "Tohmajärweltä". –Serkses Syrjäläinen, carter's son).

⁴³ Finnish Literature Society Literature Archives, Letter Collection 85, Serkses Syrjäläinen, (Letter received 23.5. 1861).