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## Sourcing practices in online journalism: An ethnographic study of the formation of trust in and the use of journalistic sources

--Manuscript Draft--

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**Sourcing practices in online journalism:  
An ethnographic study of the formation of trust in and the use of journalistic sources**

*Journal of Media Practice*

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**KEYWORDS:** Online journalism, trust, news sources, source credibility, sourcing practice, trust discourses

## Introduction

More information than ever is made available to the public, yet making sense of it has never been more difficult – a well-worn cliché which still rings true. The near-universal, near-ubiquitous reach of the internet exposes any net-goer to a wealth of both information and disinformation. Much of the nonsense can be identified as such with even the most rudimentary media literacy skills, but also well disguised misinformation abounds online. Some of it is spread in good faith by gossiping social media users, some is planted by mischievous pranksters, and some is purposefully propagated by partisan activists, agents of terrorist organisations, or even sovereign states.

In a maelstrom of contradictory accounts capable investigators and explainers are in high demand. For some time now this task of sense-making has been suggested as the new *raison d'être* for professional journalism – in contrast to its earlier occupation of putting out carefully hand-picked assortments of information (e.g. Singer 2006). Unfortunately, journalists themselves are subject to the same dangers that threaten the public at large. Are they able to navigate their way through the rip tides of the online information environment and produce trustworthy content for others? The currently available evidence suggests no: online newsrooms appear to be understaffed, overworked, and dependent on press releases and other media.

What truly goes on within the walls of newsrooms, or online newsrooms for that matter, is woefully under-researched. To alleviate the issues supposedly plaguing online newsrooms we must identify the problems and their root causes. The underlying assumption of this article is that online journalists' sourcing practices differ from other journalists due to the specific conditions of online journalism. In this study I focus on the sourcing practices in Finnish online newsrooms. I begin by reviewing the aforementioned context: the distinctive features of online sources and the working conditions of online journalists. I will then present the findings of an empirical, ethnographic study conducted in seven Finnish online newsrooms in early 2013. As a result, five distinctive rationales to source use and evaluation were discovered.

## The internet as a journalistic environment

The internet is a convenient resource for the overburdened journalist. Its use as an information source, however, bears many risks. Much of online content is dubious in nature, and sometimes even journalists get led astray (Klinenberg 2005, 56; Metzger 2007). This is not to say that traditional sources would not be wrought with similar problems; the internet merely lowers the access threshold for those seeking to mislead, and makes it easy to veil the source's true nature.

These issues were identified from early on, and much debate has since followed. John Fritch and Robert Cromwell (2000, 500) formulated the core problem roughly as follows: information published online is not always accompanied by sufficient information on its author, and even if said information was given, the disclosure could be a lie, and because online publishing is open to practically everyone, the chances of running into a hoax are higher online than in other forms of media. Even information published with pure intent can mislead readers, if they are unable to put the source's motivation and expertise into context (Greer 2003, 12; Metzger, Flanagin and Medders 2010, 414–415). The issues are common to all media, but in the case of online media their risks are amplified by the sheer volume of available content combined with the lack of consistent gatekeeping. Empirical findings confirm that the online environment bears risks that are, if not exclusive, at least distinctive to it. For example, news based solely on citations from other media (all too common online) are problematic: inattentive readers will evaluate the information based on the proximate source (i.e. the source that the information is received from), rather than on the originating source (Kang et. al. 2011).

Problems associated with the online environment are not insurmountable, or even fully new – rather they are variations of age-old issues relating to trust and trustworthiness. A number of procedures and routines have been proposed to help both journalists and laypeople to exercise proper source criticism online. However, the existence of media literacy does not directly translate

into the exercise of it. In practice most internet users do not verify the information they assume, and even those who do, usually do so with the least possible effort (Flanagin and Metzger 2000, 531–532; Metzger 2007, 2089). Despite recognizing the dangers, most internet users form trust to online sources fast, and base their trust on only few factors (Greer 2003, 26; Lucassen and Schraagen 2012, 1). Some people claim to verify online information they use, even when they do not (Flanagin and Metzger 2007, 334). In short, the issues related to online sources are widely recognized, but this is not reflected by practice.

Scant research has been done on journalists in this respect. Does the same apply to them as what applies to the larger public? So far the question has not been answered, but some hypotheses can be made: Since basic media literacy skills should have saturated most societal strata (at least in high internet usage countries, such as Finland), the crucial question is whether or not the safeguards are implemented. Critical source analysis requires motivation, which is contingent on many factors such as personal bias over the topic, personal disposition to analytical thinking, and the need for information. (Dochterman and Stamp 2010a, 2010b; Metzger, 2007; Vraga et. al. 2011; Wathen and Burkell 2001).

These, and many other sources of influence are structured in the *hierarchy of influences* model compiled by Pamela Shoemaker and Stephen Reese (1996). The model categorizes five different levels of influence sources that can affect the journalistic end product: the ideological, the extramedia, the organisational, the routine, and the personal level. The model is theoretical in nature, and lends itself to contemporary analysis even despite the fact that it was originally published in a very different media landscape. For example, disposition to analytical thinking is an influence source residing on the personal level of the hierarchy, while the need for information can be seen as an organisational influence, if hurry is the result of an understaffed department. The hierarchy is created by the flow of influence through the levels. Ideology is pervasive throughout society, including extramedia conditions such as competition, which affects the organisational level – for example the amount of journalists a newspaper can afford to hire. The number of journalists affects, among other things, the way their work routines are set up. Finally, the streams of influence culminate in the work produced by the journalist, who adds his or her personal touch to the mix according to personal knowledge, interest, passion, conscience, belief and whim (Tanikawa 2016). To understand why a journalistic product is what it is, one must look at the influences under which it was produced. There are reasons to assume that the influences in online journalism are different from other media.

After the internet's introduction to the public in mid-1990's it was laden with great expectations of improving journalism. Not only did it offer new, practical tools for information gathering, but also a more flexible medium for publishing. Some of the more utopian beliefs held that the opportunity to publish at will would rid journalists of deadlines and lead to more patient journalism (e.g. Pavlik 2001). Since then changes have indeed taken place, but not as fast or as positive as had been hoped (Quandt 2008a; Scott 2005).

One of the most prominent ideas of journalism's future was that of the multimedia journalist (e.g. Deuze 2001, 15; 2004). Journalism would, for large parts, be produced by journalists detached from traditional newsroom hierarchies. They would produce and edit text, audio, and video, maybe even create code and mash up different forms of media. (Quandt 2008b, 95; e.g. Dua 2009). Reality has not met these expectations. Even though experimental takes on journalism exist, most online journalism is conventional. Be it text, audio or video, online journalism treads the trails blazed a long time ago by pioneers of newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. (Deuze 2003, 219; Quandt and Singer 2009, 137; Quandt 2008a, 718–720; Scott 2005, 110). The reason to this disconnection between the near-infinite possibilities and the modest progress so far is unclear. Journalists may be lacking technical skills, or newsrooms may be optimizing their output to the conventional tastes of the public (Brannon 2008, 109–111; Domingo 2008, 115; Quandt and Singer 2009, 137). Or it could be that the realities of online news work prevent resource intensive experiments.

The internet has, nonetheless, expanded and replaced parts of the journalists' toolkit. It is

used to seek information and contacts, and stay in touch with sources. In many ways, the internet is used in very similar manner as earlier tools of the trade (Quandt 2008b, 95). The internet has streamlined existing production models rather than revolutionized them. The increase of productivity has been realized as *more* products, instead of *better* products. Time is of the essence, and with no temporal or spatial limits to content, there's never time to waste – any excess could be put toward creating more content. In addition, online newsrooms are expected to react to developing news stories on a very short notice. In practice this requires the constant monitoring of, for example, e-mail and competitors' websites (Granado 2011; Quandt, 2008b, Witschge 2013). Today, one might add various social media as something to monitor. As a result online journalists are extremely busy and tied to their desks (Brennen 2009, Juntunen 2009; Quandt 2008b; Scott 2005). These working conditions force online journalists to rely heavily on the sources most conveniently available to them. These include press releases, news websites, wire services, and content produced by affiliated media outlets. (Colson and Heindryckx 2008, 144; Granado 2011; Juntunen 2011; Klinenberg 2005; Scott 2005).

The conditions described above are problematic for what might be generally referred to as 'journalistic quality'. The reliance on convenient sources allows non-journalistic actors and motivations to further influence the journalistic product. Earlier studies indicate that online journalists are not blind to the issue, but rather frustrated with their inability to uphold their own standards of quality and independence (Gladney, Shapiro and Castaldo 2007; Juntunen 2011; Mitchelstein and Boczkowski 2009; Quandt and Singer 2009; Strömbäck, Karlsson and Hopmann 2012; Witschge 2013; c.f. Colson and Heindryckx 2008, 150). As a result, journalists in general believe errors of various kinds are more prevalent in online news than in other forms of journalism (Cassidy 2007, Rusila 2013). Some journalists appear to accept and advocate the change of standards online (Lee and Treadwell 2013; Singer 2006; Reinardy 2010; Robinson 2009) while many still prefer to stick with tradition (Fortunati et. al. 2009).

The issues mentioned above do not suggest that online journalists are incompetent, or incapable of exercising proper source critique. However, the described conditions give reason to assume that online journalists are at a heightened risk of using sources that are fraudulent, distorted or inaccurate. Hence I put forward the following questions:

RQ1: *What sources do online journalists use?*

RQ2: *Why do online journalists use the sources they do?*

## **Method**

The question of *why* online journalists choose to use certain sources is vital to the evaluation of their journalistic process. First, however, we must know *what* sources are being used and what are not. This is both the logical and the chronological structure of this study. The research method can be described as ethnographic. The research consisted of periods of observation followed by semi-structured interviews with the observation subjects, Finnish online journalists.

Newsroom ethnography tradition is sometimes divided into two waves. The first wave, it is said, rose in the 1970s and broke in the following decade. Researchers such as Gaye Tuchman and Herbert Gans were some of the most prominent names of the trend. Describing this strand of research Simon Cottle (2000) called for a second wave of newsroom ethnography. Chris Paterson (2008, 3) has since declared the second wave begun, describing it as especially interested in new technology and the changes it has brought. In this sense, the study at hand can be seen as an extension of the 'second wave' of newsroom ethnography. This distinction is of little significance, but the demarcation specifically into *newsroom* ethnography is. The realities of news work rarely allow for such long periods of embedded observation that are considered the ideal in traditional ethnography (for an exception, see Schlesinger 1978). In this study, the observation periods lasted for a single work shift, usually little over seven hours, while participant observations in cultural



anthropology may have lasted even for years (Davies 2008).

Initially, fifteen Finnish online journalists were observed and interviewed in seven newsrooms. Three of the newsrooms were those of daily mid-market newspapers (*Helsingin Sanomat*, *Aamulehti*, and *Keskisuomalainen*); one of a mid-market special interest newspaper published every other day (*Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*); one of a daily tabloid (*Ilta-Sanomat*); one of a pure-player news website (*Uusi Suomi*); and one was the national broadcasting corporation YLE's central online newsroom. The number of observed journalists from each newsroom varied between one and three. The observations and interviews were conducted in January, February and March of 2013. Two newsrooms were re-visited in late 2015 and early 2016 for single observation periods and interviews. The 'retakes' were used to confirm the data obtained earlier, and this data is excluded from the following analysis.<sup>1</sup>

The observations were designed to cover one entire work shift, which was spent observing a single journalist. This was achieved by most parts: some observation periods were cut short from the standard shift. The shortest observation lasted 3.5 hours, while the longest lasted 9 (the average having been 7.5 hours). In total, the observations spanned 109 hours and 48 minutes, during which 113 individual pieces of journalism were produced and published. The observed online journalists also edited and published material prepared earlier by their colleagues, but this study was limited to any journalistic product the production of which could be observed from the beginning to the moment it left the journalist's hands as a finished product. Some pieces were excluded from the data as non-journalism in the sense that they did not evoke the news organization's prestige to claim truth value (such as user comment compilations).

The observations and interviews were informed by the *hierarchy of influences* model (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). I have used the model both as a clue in data collection and as a reference point in the final data analysis.

During observations three kinds of data were systematically collected: All journalistic products and their sources (both actual and prospective) were catalogued, and the time spent on each individual piece (with the accuracy of minutes) recorded. The journalists' work was followed in person. The journalists were aware of the research, but the focus on sourcing practices was not mentioned until the end of each observation. The observees were asked to try and work as they naturally would. Casual conversation with the researcher was allowed, if the observees felt more comfortable doing so. During the observation conversations were not initiated by the researcher, unless some aspect of the journalist's work needed clarification.

All interviews, except for one, were arranged immediately after the observed work shift. Some shifts were finished early so that the interviews could be conducted during regular working hours. In other cases the interviews added to the observees' time spent at work; it was not confirmed whether or not the interviewees received pay from this time. The observed shifts' timing varied from early morning to night shifts. It is possible that receiving or not receiving pay, and the interviews' timing affected the journalists' willingness to elaborate their answers, but very few indications of this were observed.

All interviews followed the same basic structure: first the interviewees were asked about their educational and occupational history, and of their current duties as an online journalist; then they were asked to recount each piece they produced, the sources they used and the sources they discarded, and to elaborate their reasoning behind each decision. At the end interviewees were asked whether the observed shift had been a typical one, and if they wanted to add anything to the interview.

The method of using observations as the basis for reconstruction interviews proved fruitful, if also laborious. On many occasions the journalists did not actively remember all the sources they had investigated during the journalistic process, but recalled them upon a cue. Some journalists produced high volumes of individual pieces, up to 27 during a single shift, which makes the patchwork recollection understandable. Having the observation notes at hand made it possible to remind the journalists of details that would otherwise have been lost, capturing the journalistic process more fully. The method, however, is not without potential problems, many of which can be

illuminated by comparing it to the blind reconstruction interviews employed by Zvi Reich (2011). Reich researched the sources used by Israeli journalists by first pre-selecting a number of relevant news stories, and then asking their writers to randomly select some for closer examination. Then the journalists were asked to recount the sourcing process of each randomized story with the interviewer never knowing which exact stories were in question. By deliberately denying the researcher access to identifying information, Reich was able to protect journalistic source confidentiality. As illustrated by my experiences, this method may fail to capture the process in its entirety. The upside in Reich's method is that it allows journalistic pieces of sensitive nature to be included in the research. Journalists might be unable to freely discuss confidential sources with a researcher in an *a posteriori* interview, and they (or their sources) are likely to feel inhibited to discuss sensitive matters in the presence of a researcher.

In my study directly observable sources were notified of the study and asked for permission, although such instances were rare. In each situation the source consented to being observed during his or her interaction with the journalist. It seems likely that online journalists very rarely deal with sensitive live-interview situations (as none were observed during the production of the 113 observed pieces). This occupational trait makes online journalists better subject of observation research than, say, investigative journalists. Still, aforementioned issue should be taken into account when considering this approach.

The interviews lasted from 19 to 38 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews were used to glean qualitative data on source evaluation and on general aspects of online journalism as a profession. The observation notes (confirmed by interviews) were used to collect quantitative data on online journalists' use of time and different source types.

## **Results: General aspects of working in online journalism**

Before going into the main results of the study, some general notes on the work of Finnish online journalists are worth presenting. These supplementary findings largely confirm earlier research on the nature of online journalism. It should be noted, however, that the sample size was far too small to alone afford broad generalizations, but convergence with existing scholarship suggests the observations' commonality.

Firstly, while the age range of interviewed online journalists was from 22 to 54, most of them were what could be called 'young adults': ten out of fifteen were 27 to 30 years old. The same goes for career length: while some had worked as journalists for decades, most had done so for less than five years. All participants were in permanent employment and all but one had studied (or were studying at the time of observation) communication. It could thus be said that most online journalists observed in this study were at the early stages of their careers as journalists. Out of the three more experienced journalists one held a middle-management position which included cross-media duties, and one was rotated from print for a period of online work – only one experienced journalist was working exclusively for online publication. Two reasons come to mind: online work might be treated as a transitional position on a career leading to something more respected, or younger journalists have (either factually or supposedly) better technical skills than older journalists. Existing evidence from other countries suggests that the prior explanation is more likely (e.g. Hartley 2011; Vobič and Milojević 2014).

Online journalists' comparatively young age and short journalistic work histories do not necessarily decrease the quality of journalism they produce. There are, however, other aspects of their work that are almost certain to do so. An especially striking feature of the observed journalists' work is its broken structure. Most observees were tasked with highly varied duties beyond the production of journalism. For example, they might: update and illustrate pieces prepared by their colleagues, edit and re-purpose pieces produced for a different medium, answer and redirect calls, moderate comment sections, engage audience in social media, reorient the organization's web page according to visitor metrics, and actively scan competing media for story ideas. The observed online

journalists would usually focus on a single task only for a short period of time – an observation that echoes the measurements done earlier in German online newsrooms (Quandt 2008b, 86). In my study, the journalists used less than half of their shifts (mean value of 2 hours and 45 minutes, or 39 per cent) on producing content, when interruptive actions (such as checking social media accounts or answering phone calls) were deducted from the total production time. Even at best, 66 per cent of a shift was used for content production. Still the observees produced on average 7.5 (mean value, median value of 6) journalistic pieces per shift. This brings the mean value of time spent on a single piece to roughly 28 minutes. While some stories took over an hour to produce, most were researched, written and published in a matter of minutes – some even in two minutes or less!

The inability to leave the newsroom for information gathering, mentioned in earlier research (e.g. Juntunen 2011), was also noticed in this study. In only one of the seven observed newsrooms online journalists left the office for work. This desk-boundedness was also reflected in the sources they used. Roughly one quarter of all observed journalistic pieces ( $n=113$ ) was based solely on press releases and another quarter solely on other media. Even most of the multi-sourced pieces combined sources such as press releases, telephone interviews with senders of said press releases, and older stories published by the journalist's own organization. Everything mentioned above confirms online journalists' dependency on pre-produced content.

One final observation is worth mentioning: the online journalists have seemingly high autonomy and broad editorial mandate. Most observees were not only allowed but also expected to decide on a piece's publishing – whether it was fit to publish, and even *when* it should be published. In some newsrooms the on-duty online journalists also served as sub-editors for the stories pouring in from wire services and, for example, from print journalists within the same organization. The added responsibility may or may not put extra pressure on the online journalists, but the lack of editorial supervision over the online journalists' own pieces is problematic. Even if an online journalist would recognize the need for advice, he or she might be unable to consult a senior journalist. Especially when associated with print newsrooms online journalists are more likely than others to work alone late in the evening or early in the morning. It is common for Finnish journalists to quote a rule-of-thumb of 'always having two pairs of eyes go through a story' before publishing (e.g. Manninen 2014), but in online journalism this review routine appears to be compromised. This observation matches existing literature on the topic (e.g. Lee-Wright, Phillips and Witschge 2012, Russial 2009).

## **Results: Five trust discourses**

After interviewing the journalists about the sources they did (and did not) use, five distinctive rationales for source use were identified. I call these clusters of explanations generally as 'trust discourses'. Each discourse has a distinctive pattern of common journalistic sources, and influence source tiers as described by Shoemaker and Reese (1996). That is to say: the use of different journalistic sources is rationalized differently, and different types of influences shape those rationalizations. My typification bears resemblance to existing literature on trust and credibility, to which I will make reference when appropriate. The trust discourses presented here, however, are not formulated from existing theories. Instead they emerge from the material, which in turn was influenced by the aim to research specifically journalistic source selection. In some part, journalistic rationales for source selections seem to defy the general logic behind trust as a psychosocial phenomenon, which is why I chose not to force the observations into existing categorizations. Much of the results could indeed be interpreted through other theoretical lenses, but with the cost of having to prune some ill-fitting findings. Yet it is my understanding that these misfit findings, which are on the border of existing scholarship's notion of 'trust' and 'credibility', are of the greatest significance to this study's topic. Hence, I have formulated a new, five-point categorization presented below.

### *Ideological trust*

When asked why they chose to use a specific source, online journalists often gave a rationale that can be reduced to the rhetorical question: 'Why wouldn't I?'. I have named this trust discourse as ideological trust, which echoes Shoemaker and Reese's ideological level of influence. Of course, the etymology and the theoretical provenance of the term can be traced much further back. In short, the hegemonic ideology of a society dictates which things are seen as natural and which deviant. According to Shoemaker and Reese the ideological level of influence affects news work by defining the things that can and should be covered by routine, and which things are newsworthy only when they deviate from the 'norm'. An understanding of ideological trustworthiness is only a short step away from the idea of ideological normality.

During the interviews many interviewees admitted that they had never even considered doubting certain sources. By and large these sources were press releases sent out by public officials, especially the police and rescue services. This mirrors the hegemonic ideology of the Finnish society: in the annual Reader's Digest survey, police and firemen are practically uncontested when ranked by respect and trustworthiness (Tiina Suomela, personal communication on 4.9.2015). When prompted to the issue, some interviewees began to ponder their unquestioned trust of the authorities. Some agreed that as journalists they might be too trusting, while others argued that not trusting the authorities would make their work near-impossible.

Some interviewees cited earlier experience as a reason to trust the authorities in question as sources. These notions, however, seemed to come as afterthoughts. By and large the authorities' trustworthiness was assumed, not learned through experience. This relates the ideological trust discourse to a categorization common in existing trust literature: ascribed trust. The phenomenon has been described with different names, and ascribed (in contrast to 'earned') trust is used by Rom Harré (1999). This divide describes whether trust is based on the truster's direct experiences of the trustee, or not. While the interviewed online journalists may have had direct experiences with the authorities in question (be they branch offices or individual people), their trustworthiness as sources was clearly based on their status as authorities – and not just any authorities, but authorities that are ideologically trusted in Finnish society. The ideological trust discourse is well crystallized in the following quote by one of the interviewees: 'If you can't trust the police, I don't know whom you can'. This trust discourse should not be seen as exclusive to public authorities, even if they are the source category that most commonly evokes this trust discourse in the Finnish context. In other cultures, journalistic or otherwise, different sources may be seen *trustworthy by default*.

### *Pragmatic trust*

The observed online journalists used public authorities widely as sources, but not all expressed the same unquestioned belief in their trustworthiness (as described above). Instead, some interviewees used public authorities (and some other sources) despite having reservations. In these cases the online journalists recognized the possibility of false information, but they evaluated the sources to be *trustworthy enough* to be used. Three interlocking reasons were identified within this discourse: the source's expertise, its availability, and previous experiences with the source. Expert status makes people and institutions usable sources, as citing them makes the story appear more credible to the audience (Miller and Kurpius 2010). The availability factor is related to the critique-discouraging effect of need for information: sometimes a journalist is limited to the available sources, if the ideal sources are not accessible (or are not accessible conveniently enough). The expertise and availability factors often combine in public authorities: they commonly are the expert sources on topics of interest, and they often have routine contact procedures for the media. In the words of an interviewee: 'They [a government institution] make these studies, and I would go ahead and trust them. If I didn't, where else would I get this kind of information?'. Finally, previous (positive) experiences with some sources make them more likely to be used again. The latter point, naturally, relates to the concept of earned trust as Harré (1999) calls it. A lack of these qualities in a source leads to journalists' aversion to it, which can be observed, for example, as reluctance to use

alternative online sources such as commoners' blogs (Volkmer and Firdaus 2013).

Aforementioned factors are all heuristic patterns, which allow online journalists to quickly fall back on certain 'pre-selected' sources. This is especially useful in the modern 'information blizzard' faced by journalists (Phillips 2010, 90). Those sources may not fully convince the journalist, but they are nonetheless considered good enough to publish: they are time-proven, widely recognized, or easily available. The common, distinctive quality of all these evaluations is their practicality, hence the name *pragmatic* trust. The journalists are not necessarily trusting of the sources' *truthfulness*, but rather their *usefulness* in the journalistic process. This usefulness is determined both by the journalists' needs and the source's qualities, which define the pragmatic discourse as being affected by the *routine level* and the *extramedia level* of influence in the Shoemaker and Reese (1996) hierarchy of influences. This means that source selection founded on the pragmatic trust discourse is always to some extent influenced by non-journalistic actors and motivations (e.g. savvy PR departments can use press releases to subsidize a particular topic or a preferred take on it).

### *Cynically pragmatic trust*

In some cases, the practical nature of source selection can go as far as being downright cynical. The interviewees occasionally ignored a source's truth value, arguing that it *did not matter*. A few online journalists even expressed open distrust of the sources they used. The use of the word 'trust' in this context is clearly a stretch – but permissible in the sense that the interviewees still were confident enough to use those sources in their stories. A similar phenomenon, called system trust, is described in existing literature on trust (e.g. McEvily et. al. 2006, 53). System trust is partially based on the deterring effects of formal or semi-formal systems. For example, the legal and social sanctions associated with theft decrease the likelihood of shoplifting, which allows shopkeepers to maintain trust towards their patrons. The cynically pragmatic trust discourse operates in a similar manner. Lying to the press bears risks of sanctions to the sources (bad publicity), but in addition to the punitive effect, a different system alleviates the journalists' risks associated with relying on those sources (by using citations to shift responsibility). The latter mechanism relates to 'the ritual of transparency' (Karlsson 2011, 100–102). In line with Karlsson's formulation, sources subject to this form of trust were in this study always prominently cited, often starting from the stories' headlines.

The interviewed online journalists gave two main reasons for using sources they were distrustful of: intrinsic news value and lack of alternatives. Statements by politicians and some other publicly prominent figures have intrinsic news value regardless of their truthfulness. Similarly, the interviewees saw some breaking news to be of such importance (or occasionally, of such entertainment value), that they deserved retransmission even if the story had to be copied entirely from a competitor. The two most prominent source categories, the use of which was justified by the cynically pragmatic discourse, were politicians and single competing media organizations. In terms of the hierarchy of influences model, this trust discourse is shaped by the *routine level* (with regards to citation practices) and the *ideological level* (in determining intrinsic news value). *Extramedia level* has slight influence to what topics emerge (or exist, for that matter), but after a story has broken outside actors have little agency to promote certain views over others via cynically pragmatic trust, as quotability and intrinsic values are the only qualifying factors.

### *Consensual trust*

When the observed journalists used multiple media sources for a story, they saw necessary to evaluate both the sources and the presented information (in contrast to the cynically pragmatic trust associated with using single media sources). In these cases, consensus among sources was used as a qualifying factor for the use of particular source or information. Even if the consensual trust discourse was in this study observed almost exclusively in relation to (multiple) media sources, nothing suggests that the discourse could not apply to other source types as well. The reliance on

consensus among a multitude of outside sources makes the *extramedia level* of Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchical model the most influential one to this discourse. It should be noted that despite its name the term 'extramedia' refers to all factors outside a particular media organization, not only to factors outside the media as a whole.

As a departure from the other discourses, consensual trust is applied more on the information itself rather than on its source. In this sense, the discourse is similar to the epistemological coherence theory (e.g. Johnson 1992). It refers to the human propensity to hold as truths claims that are in accordance with existing information. Consensual trust discourse operates in the same way, but with a more limited range of reference points, as it applies only to other journalistic sources (i.e. sources *used in* journalism, not necessarily sources that *are* journalism). In addition to pieces of information, the consensual discourse can also be used to justify the use of specific sources. An interviewee elaborated the logic as follows: if a source of unidentified trustworthiness presents the same information as other sources, that source, too, can be considered trustworthy.

### *Contextual trust*

The last of the five trust discourses is arguably the one best suited to journalistic pursuits. By contextual discourse journalists are able to, *in bona fide*, justify the use of sources they by default find questionable. Within the contextual discourse a source is deemed trustworthy only after the source's interests in the story have been reviewed. That is to say: a source is only trustworthy 'under the circumstances'. In contrast to the consensual discourse, the contextual discourse is based on the qualities of the source rather than on informational concomitance with other sources. Politicians, corporations and advocacy groups may all be trustworthy sources if they have no interest to mislead (or rather, if they are perceived as such).

The interviewees based the contextual trust discourse broadly on two reasons: either the source had compelling reasons to be truthful, or it had no apparent reasons *not* to be truthful. The latter explanation (lack of incentives to deceive) was more common, and it was often cited in relation to political sources. The prior qualification often concerned experts on a particular topic who were trusted because trustworthy behaviour (in relation to that topic) was seen to be in the expert's own best interest. The role of expertise in this discourse is reminiscent of the pragmatic discourse, but the two differ in their temporal qualities. Trust in the contextual discourse is born and exists only within the context of a particular media event, whereas the pragmatic discourse bestows experts with legitimacy also between stories. Continued trust formed by the pragmatic discourse enables the journalists to form time-saving routines, while temporary trust formed by the contextual discourse requires journalists to re-evaluate potential sources in relation to each new situation.

The contextual discourse is affected by most levels of the Shoemaker and Reese (1996) hierarchy of influences. The evaluation of each story's context is reliant on many things, such as 'common knowledge' (*ideological level*), outside sources (*extramedia level*), methods of investigation (*routine level*), and the journalist's personal biases (*personal level*). The contextual discourse is the most cognitively laborious form of trust formation, and so it is only natural that many different influences come into play. Only the organisational level (located between the routine and extramedia levels) should be excluded as a notable source of influences. It is barely foreseeable how a source might become more or less trusted depending on how the news organisation is arranged. Shoemaker and Reese themselves describe this level of influence being able to, for example, affect what kind of stories are published: a financially unstable newspaper may be compelled to appease major advertisers or wealthy audience segments. In theory, this influence could also project onto source selection, but no evidence of it was observed during this study.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Above I have described five *trust discourses*, which are the outspoken rationales behind (Finnish

online) journalists' source use. All observed source use decisions can be described with these five discourses. Sometimes source use was based clearly on a single discourse, but more often than not two or even more discourses overlapped within a single instance of source use. This fits in with Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy of influences model, in which different tiers of influences are stacked upon each other

The study of trust discourses is twice useful because of their connection to influence sources. Firstly, such studies allows the mapping of source use and evaluation thereof. Secondly, the manifestation of different discourses could be used as an indicator of what influences are in effect. An additional, practical application of the categorization might be found in journalistic self-reflection both in professional life and journalism education. The following table (1) presents the five trust discourses and the tiers of influence most common to them, along with the discourses' other main characteristics.

This study was small-scale and qualitative in nature. It was conducted in a specific professional and societal environment, and at a specific time. For these reasons the study's generalizability can be debated, but it is my belief that while the proportions of different trust discourses may vary, the discourses themselves are common to all journalists. This opens a new, relevant line of inquiry: quantitative and comparative application of the trust discourse model. As I have argued: different work pressures are likely to evoke different trust discourses, the study of which could provide a new platform for the comparison and classification of different journalistic environments.

A final, methodological caveat: this five-point categorization was based on journalists' own, outspoken rationalizations of their source use. As with all interviews, the results are, or at least may be, detached from the reality of the research topic – the thought processes of journalists. Their answers may have reflected the perceived journalistic standards rather than their actual thoughts. It was my interpretation that in some instances the interviewees made efforts to rationalize their seemingly blind trust with previous experiences (see the paragraph on ideological trust). It is also possible that I misinterpreted the interviewees' non-verbal cues. The potential misinterpretation of source use instances by the researcher poses a problem for quantitative applications. For the current, qualitative study the issue is smaller: while single source use instances may fall under wrong categories, it is unlikely (although possible) that entire categories would remain unnoticed because of it. Luckily the validation of the categorization is a simple, if work-intensive, matter of testing it at different newsrooms and by different researchers.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the two observed online journalists wrote 7 stories during the observed shift. The other wrote (self-reportedly) three stories during the first few, unobserved hours of the shift, while spending the rest of the shift researching an unfinished piece and updating older pieces. While the observed work of the two journalists were markedly different, they both fit within the variety observed in the 2013 sample. By personal traits they hit the 2013 average in age, work history and education. Both journalists made a point about organisational changes having been done within the past few years and new changes being in the planning. This suggests that the observed, persistent features of online journalism are not the result of organisational factors, common to most if not all online newsrooms, but of the online medium itself.

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TABLE 1 Characteristics of trust discourses

Trust discourse	Basic nature	Temporal quality	Tiers of influence	Commonly observed source types
Ideological	The source is trustworthy <i>by default</i> .	Persistent.	Ideological level.	Authorities
Pragmatic	The source is trustworthy <i>enough</i> .	Persistent.	Routine level. Extramedia level.	Authorities, experts, institutions.
Cynically pragmatic	The source's trustworthiness is <i>irrelevant</i> .	Persistent.	Routine level. Ideological level.	Single media sources, politicians.
Consensual	The source and/or information is trustworthy, because <i>other sources confirm</i> the information.	Temporary.	Extramedia level.	Multiple media sources.
Contextual	The source is trustworthy <i>in this case</i> .	Temporary.	Ideological level. Extramedia level. Routine level. Individual level.	Corporations, NGO's, politicians.