If only they knew: Audience expectations and actual sourcing practices in online journalism

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Abstract

This article answers the question "Are the sourcing practices in Finnish online journalism trustworthy?" Here, trustworthiness is operationalized as the fulfillment of audience expectations towards sourcing practices. To this end, expectations of young Finnish adults (aged 18-28) were compared to the observed practices of Finnish online journalists. A total of 36 news items (from 12 journalists working in three newsrooms, published in 2013 and 2017) were analyzed. The analysis indicates that online journalists' sourcing practices largely do not conform to this audience segment's expectations. Namely, the audience expects more comprehensive investigation and thorough verification than what is common practice in online journalism. The use of high-credibility sources is both expected and commonplace. The results imply that transparency may be harmful rather than beneficial to journalism's credibility, as the unveiled practices do not always meet audience expectations.

Keywords: online journalism, sourcing, trust, trustworthiness

Introduction

This article examines the sourcing practices of online journalists from the audience's viewpoint. I ask whether a particular audience segment (young adults) would condone journalists' practices, if they knew how news are sourced. This normative perspective –anchored to audience expectations– is rarely explored, perhaps as an infringement on the profession's autonomy. When research does consider the audience, it almost always does so with regards to the evident features of a journalistic end-product, such as the choice of topic (e.g. Boczkowski & Mitchelstein 2013). However, the unseen "backstage" processes of journalism are at least as important, and among them sourcing is arguably the most important. It affects what information and opinions are (and can be) transmitted, and it does so largely beyond audience's scrutiny. On these hidden parts, journalism is a "credence good" (McManus 1994, 65-66): the audience has no way to ascertain its actual quality, even after enjoying the product. What goes on in the backstage usually stays hidden. A glimpse behind the curtains might be disillusioning – at worst breaking the trust journalists need to maintain an audience (e.g. Young 2016).

Trust, put very generally, is expectation of future behavior consistent with the trusting party's interests (Misztal 1996). Much has been written about trust in journalism, and decline thereof (e.g. Ladd 2011, Müller 2013). Generally trust in journalism is seen as a positive phenomenon, something worth encouraging among citizens, most prominently for civic reasons (e.g. Brants 2013). Furthermore, audience trust is a "business imperative" for publishers (Young 2016, p. 1) and public relations professionals alike (Jackson & Moloney 2015). Trust, however, is not omniscient: it can only be based on the outward expressions of desirable characteristics, i.e. credibility (for a broad overview of general credibility studies, see Pornpitakpan 2006). This means trust can be misplaced and subsequently broken, if expectations are not met. I call the quality of consistently meeting expectations as "trustworthiness"[1]. Considering the virtue of expectancy fulfillment, the study presented in this article asks:

Do sourcing practices of online journalists meet audience expectations?

This question is investigated in the specific context of Finnish online journalism, and the expectations young Finnish adults (ages 18-28) hold for it. Younger demographic groups are typically the most prolific users of online news (Mitchell et al. 2018), and investigating their attitudes may be useful in predicting future trends in the wider population. Furthermore, my earlier study (Manninen 2018) on young adult Finn's normative expectations for journalism suggests their ideals are aligned with those of older Finns (Kunelius 2000). Cross-national generalizations, of course, cannot be derived from such localized data.

Finland is a Western democracy, and its media system is considered representative of the democratic corporatist type in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model. Finland has a strong public service broadcasting system and widespread newspaper readership. Availability and uptake of internet connections is high, and internet has since 2014 been the most heavily used medium. News use is one of the central purposes of Finns' internet use. (Official Statistics of Finland 2018). Trust in news is appears high (Digital News Report 2018), although some contrary evidence also exists (Herranen 2017). Studying young Finnish adults thus opens a window into the expectations of some of the most online savvy, yet trusting news consumers.

For sake of brevity, the term "the audience" (unless otherwise specified) will henceforth refer to this particular audience segment, while the general "audiences" will refer to the word's abstract meaning. The study is based on observational data on the sourcing practices of online journalists, which is compared to the audience's expectations, which were uncovered earlier through focus group interviews. The research responds to the call made by Kruikemeier and Lecheler (2018, 644) for "news consumer studies based on real events and news coverage, as well as content analyses examining the use of different journalistic sourcing techniques."

This article begins with a brief introduction into journalistic norms, explaining why audiences' opinions matter. Second, the article looks into what we know of audiences' expectations and whether they differ from journalists' own norms. Then, this article will present an empirical study, which juxtaposes the real-life work practices of Finnish online journalists with the norms of young Finnish adults. The article will close with a discussion on the results and their implications for both journalism and journalism studies.

Normativity and trustworthiness in journalism
Normativity is arguably the central dilemma of journalism. The question over what journalism should be like has been around as long as journalism itself, and attempts at answering it have been made for equally long. Much of these answers have been imposed upon journalism from the outside – much to the practitioners' frustration.

To crudely sum up centuries of discourse (see Christians 2009 for a more complete summary), much of the normative formulations imposed by society are functionalist in nature. In other words, journalism is seen to be "good" when it serves the society in some way, for example by facilitating political decision-making (e.g. Ladd 2011, 203-206). The exact definition of this "public interest" can and is debated endlessly, but in practical terms a wide consensus appears to exist on what the society wants from "the press" (McQuail 2010, 165). This includes, among other things, the presentation of diverse and high quality information (ibid). While these demands are often made, both formally and informally, they are less often enforced. To use Finland as an example, the national legislation restricts media (and journalism) mainly to prevent harm (e.g. against invasion of privacy). Positive regulation is kept to a minimum – there is no law, for example, that would oblige a newspaper to publish new government decrees.

Media professionals in general are loath to accept restrictions on their work. Journalists in particular feel that control from without goes against the basic tenets of journalism. Instead, journalists' associations and unions have formulated a plethora of self-regulatory ethical codes. These codes enshrine an idealized form of journalism, as imagined by journalists themselves. Study of journalists' ethical codes has revealed that journalists across the world share many values, e.g. truthfulness of information (Hafez 2002, Laitila 1995). While mostly practical, many (but not all) of these codes also allude to safeguarding democracy and public interest. For example, the Finnish Guidelines for Journalists begin by underscoring the value of freedom of speech as a cornerstone of democracy. In other words, also journalists themselves like to picture their work as serving the larger society.

The normative foundation of journalism, then, seems to be shared by both audiences and journalists – in Western democracies, at least. According to this vision, journalism should serve the public interest and democratic social order. Yet a mutually accepted goal is not enough. Audiences' perspectives on journalism praxis should be taken into account for reasons of trust and trustworthiness.

It is common to presume trust in journalism to be beneficial to societies, and democratic societies in particular(Ladd 2011, 6-9). However, the evidence is mixed: Jonathan Ladd (2011) found trust in media to increase political knowledge, while Jan Müller's (2013) analyses suggest trust has no significant effect on political learning or activity. Müller concluded that it is natural for emancipated citizens to be apprehensive towards media, while Ladd suggested distrust leads to resisting new information. The two authors rely on different data, but it is unclear what the source of their conflicting results is. Lacking conclusive evidence, the current study leans on the conventional wisdom on trust in journalism: For journalism to be able to render its services to society, it requires the trust of its audiences. Losing it will leave information ignored, opinions unheard, and public discourse stunted. In the words of John McManus (1994), journalists without an audience are "preaching to an empty church" (169). Gaining and maintaining trust hinges on whether the trusted are able to meet expectations set for them. "The more they succeed in meeting such expectations, the more likely it is that trust in them will prevail; the more that such expectations are disappointed, the greater the risk to relationships of trust" (Coleman 2012, 37). Thus, recognizing (and to an extent respecting) audiences' expectations has instrumental value in journalism, even if one rejects their wishes as its normative foundation.

It is conceivable to foster trust without actually being trustworthy. A credible façade is enough to evoke and maintain trust – but only as long as that façade is held together. However, this tactic is extremely risky: if the trusting came to realize the deception, trust would vanish and leave behind feelings of anger and betrayal. A less volatile and much more ethical approach to gaining trust is through trustworthiness (i.e. being *worthy of trust*). In journalism's case, this entails finding out whether audiences' expectations and journalists' performance match, adjusting either or both accordingly, and finally making sure audiences are aware that their expectations are being met. The study at hand tackles the first part of this agenda.

Is there a chasm between journalists and their audiences?
In order to investigate the trustworthiness of journalism –or anything, for that matter– one must compare the *bona fide* expectations of the trusting party and the actual performance of the trusted party. In journalism, the chasm between audiences and journalists has long been under debate: are journalists connected to their audiences' needs and desires – and should they even care about

audiences' appetites? The most prolific stream of this discourse focuses on topic selection. Journalists are often found to see news value in events audiences consider boring, while audiences seem to yearn for sensation (e.g. Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen 2009, 236-237; McManus 1994; Tewksbury 2003).

Several studies have observed a divide between audiences' and journalists' news values (Boczkowski, Mitchelstein & Walter 2011; Boczkowski & Peer 2011; Lee, Lewis & Powers 2012), while Singer (2011) observed both commonalities and differences. A study by Boczkowski and Mitchelstein (2013) found that journalists' and audience's interests are divergent by default, although this "news gap" closes during certain attention-grabbing news events, like elections. The gap may be quite large, as demonstrated by Lee and Chyi (2014), who found that only some one-third (36 per cent) of mainstream media content was "noteworthy" to the American audience. The finding prompted the authors to recommend journalist pay closer heed to audiences' preferences – or risk going out of business (ibid).

Beyond choice of topic, Willnat, Weaver and Wilhoit (2017, 8) have compared audiences' and journalists' conceptions of "the proper roles for the news media", finding "somewhat divergent views". An earlier study by Heider, McCombs & Poindexter (2005, 962) had already concluded that journalists and audiences "are on separate tracks headed in different directions". In contrast, van der Wurff and Schönbach (2014) found journalists' and audiences' normative views to be similar on most parts. The conflicting results are not new: Burgoon, Bernstein and Burgoon (1983) reported that newspaper journalists and their audiences share similar values, while Braman (1988) found the opposite. On an international level, Himelboim and Limor (2010, 89) compared 242 journalists' ethical codes to press theories and concluded the codes present "ideals that fail to reflect some of their most fundamental expected roles in society."

Yet another split between audiences and journalists appears to exist regarding perceptions of journalistic performance. In the United States audiences see journalism in a more negative light than journalists' (Gil de Zuñiga & Hinsley 2013), while in Israel the roles are reversed: there journalists find their own performance lacking while audiences are more content (Tsfati, Meyers & Peri 2006).

Regardless of conflicting results, even the *possibility* of a journalists-audience divide in normative conceptions should be taken seriously. The perception "that journalists do not live by their professional standards" is part of the larger phenomenon of media skepticism (Tsfati & Cappella 2003, 506), which in turn may dilute the civic benefits of journalism. Next, I will turn to what is known of audience perceptions on journalism's "professional standards" regarding sourcing practices.

Audiences' expectations towards sourcing in journalism

Audiences' expectations towards journalistic practice have usually been studied on a fairly abstract level. For example, a series of surveys in 38 countries indicated that most audiences want news media to be "unbiased" (Mitchell et al. 2018). Audiences' members are rarely asked how the practicalities of journalism should be carried out, but some attempts have been made in this direction. In the United States, The Media Insights Project sought to "develop actionable characteristics" of trusted journalism by surveying Americans over what factors lead them to trust a news source. This study found, among other things, that audiences expect (trusted) journalism to "present expert sources and data" and "get facts straight". (Young 2016). Also Bakker, Trilling and Helfer (2013) found audiences to prefer expert sources. As a source, social media seems to be

rejected by both audiences (Kruikemeier & Lecheler 2018) and journalists (ibid; Heravi & Harrower 2016; c.f. Paulussen & Harder 2014). Similarly, Grosser, Hase and Winterlin (2017) advise against using user generated content (UGC), as it is liable to undermine journalism's credibility in audiences' eyes. An earlier study in Finland also suggests audiences care little for UGC but are interested to hear from knowledgeable and/or involved sources (Ahva et al. 2011). In short: audiences expect journalism to make use of highly credible, expert sources and steer clear of social media sources and user generated content.

Studies on verification are more ambiguous. Kruikemeier and Lecheler (2018, 637) suggest audiences do not automatically assume journalistic information to be verified. A different study, however, suggests the opposite (Grosser, Hase & Winterlin 2017, 14). Expectation of verification is also hinted at by Karlsson, Clerwall and Nord (2017, 161) who found that Swedes expect journalists to "get their stories right straight off the bat". Some studies suggest verification is still the norm for journalists (e.g. Shapiro et al. 2013), while others have found journalists are increasingly replacing pre-publication verification with post-publication corrections (Hermida 2012, 2015; Joseph 2011; Lewis, Williams & Franklin 2008).

A study in Finland investigated how young adults perceive real-life journalistic practices and resulting journalism (Manninen 2018). This study discovered a number of normative expectations this audience segment (ages 18–28) hold for Finnish online journalism. The issues raised were largely the same as the ones discussed by earlier studies, underscoring their salience. In terms of sourcing practices, the audience appears to value the use of high-credibility sources, broad and all-inclusive sourcing, and pre-publication verification. (Ibid). This normative foundation, localized to Finnish online journalism, is used as the analytical framework for the current study.

Method

This study is based on the observation of and interviews with 12 Finnish online journalists, conducted in 2013 (N=6) and 2017 (N=6). This data covers the production of 36 journalistic items (26 in 2013 and 10 in 2017). It originates from two separate studies, which utilized similar methods to study the production of online journalism (Manninen 2017, 2018). Only comparable data from the two studies have been used, i.e. information on sourcing practices in three particular newsrooms.

Here, 'online journalists' are defined as journalists who produce journalistic content "primarily for online publication". Each newsroom was asked to indicate journalists in their employ that fit the description, who were then asked to volunteer to be observed and interviewed. The newsrooms included one public service broadcaster, one daily broadsheet newspaper, and one daily tabloid. At the time of study the newsrooms' websites were among the four most visited in Finland, according to the analytics company TNS Metrix. To maintain anonymity, I will refer to the newsrooms with the letters X, Y and Z, and to the journalists with their respective newsroom codes accompanied by a running numbering (e.g. Z-1). Two journalists from each newsroom participated in 2013 and another two each in 2017.

Each participant was continuously observed for 132–525 minutes (observation periods were longer in 2013 than in 2017; averages of 427 vs. 187 minutes, respectively). The observation procedure was identical in both studies: the researcher accompanied journalists to all work-related functions (breaks excluded) and took detailed notes on their work. Casual conversation was reciprocated but not initiated by the researcher. Participant journalists and their colleagues were informed that a study on "the work practices of online journalists" was underway – the precise goals of the studies were disclosed to participants only after observation. Three kinds of information were

systematically recorded in field notes: a list of completed journalistic items, the sources perused in relation to each story, and the time spent on each item (with the accuracy of full minutes). All news items that were observed from start to finish are included in the study at hand. The sample of news items is thus akin to a clustered, stratified random sample – seeking to represent the output of Finland's leading online newsrooms on an average day (no major news events took place during observations). The sample includes a wide variety of news topics, from local soft news (e.g. a case of suspected animal abuse) through business (e.g. a bankruptcy) to politics (e.g. a member of the European Parliament being reprimanded). Most news items were short news briefs, but the sample also included a few longer feature pieces.

Participating journalists were interviewed soon after the observation, typically immediately after (but in few cases the following day). Interviews were semi-structured, with slightly different question frameworks used in 2013 and 2017. In both studies, interviewed journalists were asked to detail the journalistic process behind each item they had completed under observation. Observation notes were used to confirm these descriptions and elicit elaboration on neglected details. The journalists were also asked to confirm whether or not the observed work practices were representative of their daily routines (no participant suggested the observed work was unusual beyond normal variation). These interviews lasted from just 12 to 36 minutes, depending on the amount of meaningful observations. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for later analysis.

The interview transcripts were analyzed by comparing the journalists' work practices to the audience's expectations identified in one of the aforementioned studies (Manninen 2018)[2]. In this study, production of journalistic items was observed at three mainstream newsrooms and the observation findings were discussed in focus groups comprising audience members. Groups of young Finnish adults (ages 18-28) were recruited from various educational institutions, unemployment services and through flyers disseminated to public places. The participants represented all major educational backgrounds typical of this age group (from only primary level education to tertiary level graduates). Most were either students or unemployed, although one focus group consisted of young adults in the beginning of their work careers. Compared to other Finns of their age, the participants were less affluent - mainly due to the underrepresentation of fully employed participants. All participants confirmed that they had not worked as journalists, although two participants had some knowledge of the work through relatives or through visiting a newsroom during school. These pre-existing groups (e.g. classmates, colleagues) were asked to give their initial impressions on the quality of the observed news items, after which they were given detailed information regarding the news items' production. The participants (n=34) were then asked to further discuss whether the production process conformed to their expectations. This two-step discussion format was chosen in order to highlight potential discrepancies between how a news item appears and its true provenance. It also demonstrated that the audience routinely assumes certain journalistic processes (e.g. verification) even when they are not overtly mentioned in the news text.

Applied thematic analysis (Guest, McQueen & Namey 2012) was used to identify 18 categories of expectations young Finnish adults have for journalism (e.g. informative headlines). Four of these expectations relate to sourcing and are used as the normative standard in this study. While different participants highlighted different expectations, there was no noticeable disagreement over the expectations' validity. Similarly, there was no discernible difference in opinion across focus groups, suggesting journalistic ideals are not socioeconomically differentiated (c.f. Hartley 2018), or that extant differences are mitigated by some other factor (such as shared

primary education or the example set by public service media). Further, same expectations seemed to be applied to all news items, regardless of their section on the website (e.g. politics, economy, lifestyle) or other discernible features (e.g. length). It is then reasonable to assume the expectations are fairly universal among young Finnish adults and represent their normative understanding of general, mainstream Finnish online journalism. The procedure thus follows Coleman's (2012, 37) recommendation of investigating trust through methodology that begins "by asking people how they expect the object of study to perform and derives an understanding of trust from perceived discrepancies between expectation and performance". Within the confines of the aforementioned context (the expectations of young Finnish adults on Finnish, mainstream online journalism) this methodology should be able to measure the trustworthiness of its object.

Each journalistic item in this study (n=36) was assigned a dichotomous value in four expectation categories, depending on whether or not the expectations were met. If an item met the expectations, it was coded with "1" in that category, while "0" designated a failure to meet the criteria (essentially, "pass" or "fail"). The four expectation categories are operationalized as follows.

Audience expectation categories
Source Choice is seen to conform to the audience's expectations, if the article meaningfully includes information that is corroborated or supplied by a source that ranks high in the "hierarchy of credibility" (Becker 1967). These high credibility sources are, for example: court documents, financial reports, press releases, police officers and public officials. Certain types of established media organizations are also acceptable: public service broadcasters, broadsheet newspapers and news agencies. Low credibility sources include, for example, social media, "people on the street", and tabloid media.

Source Sufficiency is achieved when the journalist has reached out to "all interested parties" of a news event. What, exactly, this includes is dependent on the context – and beyond a court case, difficult to establish conclusively. Sourcing is here considered sufficient when a journalist has contacted or attempted to contact at least two different, involved sources. For example, citing two newspapers on a highway pileup would not be considered sufficient, while interviewing two involved motorists would be. If a news event obviously has only one involved party (which is conceivable although rare), using it alone as a source is considered sufficient. An attempt at contacting a source is here considered just as valid as successfully contacting one, as it is impossible to accurately ascertain when a true *force majeure* has prevented reaching a source and when the journalist has given up too easily. This coding practice produces a "pass" condition easily, in turn resulting in a conservative estimate of the prevalence of sub-par practices.

The expectations toward *Other Media* are simple: other media should not be used as the principal source of information. It may be used to provide background information on new developments, but the core content of an article should originate from a primary source.

Verification is expected of journalism, and it is considered to have taken place when the core information of an article has been corroborated by an independent, primary source. This includes situations in which a journalist discovers a news event through a non-primary source and then proceeds to confirm that information from a primary source, but *not* situations in which the news event is initially discovered through a primary source and no further primary sources are sought. In other words, verification is the act of using *additional*, primary sources in order to improve the epistemic strength of an article. This variable may overlap with Source Choice, as high credibility sources can also be primary sources in a news event.

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For the most part, the audience's expectations were salient enough for straightforward operationalization. For example, all the conditions comprising the *Source Choice* category were explicitly mentioned in the focus group interviews (e.g. that police officers are credible sources). However, some conditions had to be derived from focus group reactions to specific journalistic processes. This is exemplified by the *Verification* category, in which the exact definition of "verification" was formulated to match the journalistic practices the audience deemed acceptable. None of the participants verbalized such an elaborate definition of what verification is, but this is what participants appeared to recognize as verification.

Results: Sourcing practices in online journalism

Most online news items analyzed in this study failed to meet the audience's expectations. Only four of the 36 items scored a "pass" in all four categories of sourcing practice expectations (items number 11, 12, 16 and 35). In addition, four items fulfilled three expectation categories (items 13, 27, 28 and 31). At the other end of the spectrum, two news items failed in all four expectation categories – both of these items were published by the same news organization (items 7 and 34). Most commonly the analyzed items (17 out of 36) met the audience's expectations in one category but failed them in all others.

Sourcing practice patterns appear remarkably similar across the three newsrooms visited for this study. Use of high credibility sources was very common in each newsroom, and at least three quarters of news items in each fulfilled expectations regarding Source Choice. In contrast, the most poorly performing category for all three news organizations was Source Sufficiency: at most, only a quarter of news items met these criteria. For newsrooms X and Z, Verification was the second-most poorly performing category (with only 25 and 20 per cent of items having been verified, respectively). For newsroom Y, slightly more items met the criteria regarding Verification (46 per cent of items getting a "pass") than Other Media (38 per cent). However, this latter difference should be considered negligible due to the small sample size.

The three newsrooms' output met, on average, from 40 to 50 per cent of the audience's sourcing-related expectations. Items were more likely to fail expectations than to meet them in all but one category: Source Choice. Both the best and worst performing expectation categories are the same for all three news organizations. There are also notable similarities in the "pass" rates of the two middling categories, Other Media and Verification. The newsrooms' "pass" rates in the Other Media category all fit within a 12 percentage point range (38–50). A notable difference between newsrooms appears only in the Verification category, where two organizations' (X and Z) items have very low "pass" rates, while the third newsroom (Y) does better, with almost half of its news items being verified. The results (grouped by newsroom) are condensed in Table 1.

[TABLE 1]

The results remain consistent even when analyzed by year, instead of by news organization. This is particularly important, as the expectation categories originate from focus group discussions regarding the sub-sample of news items observed in 2017. The expectation fulfillment rates in the four categories are similar for news items published in both 2013 and 2017. Audience-set standards for Source Choice are met most commonly, followed by Other Media, Verification, and Source Sufficiency. Overall, the similarities between newsrooms and between years suggest these findings might represent overarching trends in online news production.

Next, I will briefly present few illustrative examples from the data. To begin with an exemplary item, news item number 11 fulfilled all of the audience's expectations. Here, the journalist received an e-mail tip-off from a disgruntled consumer, who had had trouble having their cellphone repaired. The journalist interviewed the customer, a representative of the repair company, and a consumer advisor. Consumer advisors are public officials, which makes them high-credibility sources (meeting expectations towards Source Choice). The journalist had also contacted all relevant parties to the news event. The journalist did not rely on Other Media and instead verified all relevant information from different sources.

In contrast, news item number 7 failed in all categories. Here, the journalist read a news item published online by a foreign tabloid newspaper. The journalist then used Google Translate to translate the news item, which the journalist then read and re-wrote in Finnish. The journalist used a low-credibility source, sought no additional sources, verified none of the information, and based the story wholly on Other Media.

News item number 30 can be used as an example of the most typical type of sourcing process. The journalist was tasked with writing a follow-up to an earlier story, involving a case of suspected animal abuse. The basic information for item 30 came from an earlier story, written by the journalist's colleague. The journalist conducted an original interview with a spokesperson for an animal welfare association – seen as a credible source on issues related to animal abuse. However, no additional sources were sought and no information was verified. This pattern is consistent throughout much of the sample: journalists tended to seek out highly credible sources and forgo additional sourcing and vetting.

Discussion

The results indicate there is at least local discrepancy between (sourcing-related) expectations of young Finnish adults and the actual performance of (Finnish online) journalism (as produced by newsrooms X, Y and Z). Expectations of only one of the four categories investigated in this study were commonly met. This suggests online journalism is in large parts untrustworthy, as defined above. Yet Finns are peculiarly trusting of news media (both online and traditional), as indicated by the annual Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2018). While the study shows younger Finns are less trusting than older, this is in line with other countries – and even younger Finns still trust the media more than the overall population in most countries (Ibid). This seemingly unwarranted trust might be explained by the expectations' place on the journalistic "stage", either in front of or behind the curtains.

The most commonly fulfilled expectation –that of using highly credible sources– is typically something proudly displayed on the frontstage. While leaving sources uncredited is conceivable, it is common journalistic practice to cite at least one source by name. The study at hand demonstrates that these are usually high-credibility sources, which is consistent with earlier works on journalistic sourcing (e.g. Lecheler & Kruikemeier 2016, 160; Schudson 2003, 134-153). This practice reveals to audiences the most favorable part of the sourcing process (i.e. the part that is likely to best conform to their expectations).

The current study suggests additional sources are rarely searched for, let alone used. This is understandable considering the high time pressures online journalists are under (Quandt 2008), but reliance on single sources is not inevitable. A comparison of nine countries found that in most countries online news items used on average more than one source (Tiffen et al. 2014). In theory, audiences should notice the absence of a source just as well as it notices the presence of one. In

practice, omissions are less obvious unless audience members have specialized knowledge on, or particular interest in the news event. Only a small segment of audiences for any single news item is likely to notice shortcomings regarding Source Sufficiency. However, over time more audience members will likely encounter news items they can recognize as insufficiently sourced.

The use of Other Media overlaps with Source Choice, and it, too, can be displayed on the frontstage or kept hidden in the backstage. Using Other Media –also called "copycat journalism"– is common if not unavoidable in modern journalism (Preston 2009, 56-57). Results from the current study suggests the practice of recycling information from already published news items is common in Finnish online journalism, which supports earlier findings from Finland (e.g. Juntunen 2011) and elsewhere (e.g. Saridou, Spyridou & Veglis 2018). While journalists can easily omit mentions of Other Media from their work, the online environment is conducive to uncovering plagiarism. A study into the news practices of American millennials suggests young news users are keen to "go down the rabbit hole" and independently investigate news events (Burkey 2018, 8-9). Copyingwill become obvious if (and when) the original news item contains a mistake that inexplicably replicates throughout media. The likelihood of such contagious mistakes increases online (Kovach & Rosenstiel 2014, 106-107), where journalism is more fast-paced and "churnalism" more common (e.g. Boumans et al. 2018; Mabweazara 2011). Verification would be crucial in pruning out incriminating mistakes – but based on this study verification seems to be exception rather than rule online.

According to Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (2014, 98), the "discipline of verification" is the essence of journalism, the one thing that separates it from other mass communication. However, only a minority of the news items analyzed in this study were verified, even though the criteria were interpreted loosely. Though unfortunate, the result is supported by earlier research. For example, a large-scale study in Germany found that out of all investigated sub-groups, online journalists spent the least time on research (Machill & Beiler 2009). Failing expectations in this regard would likely be evaluated harshly, should audiences discover this reality. Verification, however, is distinctly a "backstage" process: audiences have no choice but to trust verification has taken place. Kruikemeier and Lecheler (2018, 644) have called for journalists to increase the transparency of their verification practices. The recommendation is based on an assumption that journalists *do* verify information, but since it goes unmentioned audiences have a needlessly poor image of journalism's trustworthiness. This view is the polar opposite of what the current study suggests: that journalists rarely verify information even though the audience expects them to do so. If the latter is true (and I contend it is), increased transparency would reveal sub-par practices and only undermine journalism's credibility. Regardless, Kruikemeier and Lecheler's recommendation should be considered in newsrooms where practices already align with audiences' expectations. Highlighting verification (or any other process expected of journalism, for that matter) will not harm the opinion of those who already trust the news outlet, but it might assuage the doubts of skeptical audience members. There is, however, a risk involved with drawing attention to verification: increasing its salience may sensitize the audience to notice lack of verification (or visible assurances thereof).

The above results do not mean journalists are failing their audiences, necessarily. There are many conceivable and understandable reasons for journalists to diverge from idealized norms. Let us consider, for example, verification. When interviewing a veteran journalist as part of the 2013 round of observations (Manninen 2017), I was told that their work would become "impossible" if they had to verify every bit of information. Implementing universal verification would require (lacking additional resources) drastic cuts to the volume of output, leaving much unreported. It is reasonable to argue that relaying unverified information serves the public better than completely withholding

that information. However, journalists are seen to have committed to trying to verify information before publishing it. In Finland, this commitment is factual and explicit: according to the self-regulatory Guidelines for Journalists, section 10: "Information obtained must be checked as thoroughly as possible, including when it has been published previously." This is not a question of whether journalists are doing "wrong"; it is a matter of whether journalists perform according to what audiences –quite legitimately– expect of them. Even the most reasonable practices will be judged untrustworthy, if they deviate from what the trusting party has been promised.

Conclusion

This study investigated whether the sourcing practices in three, major Finnish online newsrooms conform to the expectations of their young adult audiences. The results indicate they largely do not. In other words: at least to this particular audience segment mainstream Finnish online journalism is not fully trustworthy.

Four particular categories of expectations were investigated, and only one was more often satisfied than not. Namely, at least three-quarters of news items at each participating newsroom made use of high-credibility sources. Most news items in all newsrooms copied at least some information from previously published news items, did not reach out to all (or any) involved parties, and did not verify the information about to be published. This leaves the newsrooms at risk: if the audience catches a glimpse of what goes on in the backstage of journalism (or rather: what does not go on), they might lose trust in journalists. Adding transparency to journalism cannot be recommended until what lies beyond the curtain is in presentable order. Journalistic shortcomings are bound to surface even without journalists' naïve openness. New technology has greatly enhanced audiences' possibilities to conduct their own investigations and spread their findings. It is now more likely than ever for journalists to be caught and called out for ignoring sources, copying stories, and neglecting verification. The discrepancy between expectations and reality must be resolved before unwarranted trust implodes into realistic distrust.

There are two ways to close the gap between audiences' expectations and journalistic practices: by either altering practices or reshaping expectations. Journalists will do wisely to hear audiences' opinions, but I propose they retain the final say on how to best carry out the work. As a counterbalance, I would burden journalists with the responsibility of both upholding their norms and communicating them to audiences. If audiences have unrealistic expectations, journalists should consider what in their actions have caused such misconceptions. To be stable, trust must be based on a mutual understanding of commitments.

This study is limited by its modest scope and context-boundedness. The former shortcoming is compensated by the apparent commonality of its findings across different journalists, newsrooms and years. The results give an idea of which practices are most common and which are more rare – but they cannot describe exactly *how* common or rare they are. More precise data on the occurrence of different praxis will require more rigorous, quantitative methods. The sample of observed news items also limited the practices that could be discussed by the audience, which in turn limited what expectation categories could be applied in the final analysis. The sample of news items likely is representative of the daily grind of online news work in these three newsrooms, but it cannot capture online journalism in its entirety. Irregular practices, for example using anonymous sources or whistleblowers, were beyond this study. Their potential effects on journalism's trustworthiness thus remain unresolved.

The limitation of the study's context cannot be mitigated and must be taken as is. Trust can only be investigated in a particular context, which means the study's results cannot be reliably generalized beyond young Finnish adults and the online journalism produced by newsrooms X, Y and Z. Even if young Finnish adults do seem to hold the same journalism norms as older Finns did some 20 years ago (Manninen 2018), we cannot assume older Finns' ideals have remained static. Expanding our knowledge on audiences' (be they Finnish or other) expectations thus requires a series of replication studies – or at least some other corroborating evidence. Considering how laborious the methods used in this study were, producing more generalizable results would likely require new methodological innovations in this regard. I strongly advocate pursuing such discovery. In particular, methods for reliable, large-scale and unobtrusive data collection on journalistic practices would be most welcome. Combining these methods with quantitative audience studies could yield valuable insights for news organizations, journalists' professional organizations, and regulators alike. The comparison of expectations and realities is crucial to understanding trust in any context, and journalism is certainly an area in which understanding of trust is much needed.

[1] Expansive literature on credibility uses the term 'trustworthiness' to indicate one of the two main components of credibility (originally proposed by Hovland et al. 1959). I have here chosen to go against this convention and interpret the term more literally as the state of being "worthy of trust". Credibility is discussed only briefly within this article, but the reader should bear the terminological difference in mind when further exploring the literature.

[2] The normative criteria used in the study at hand, and part of the news items analyzed in it (10 out of 36) stem from my earlier study, i.e. Manninen (2018).

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