

HANDOUT

Can journalists influence their media's political content?

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Our research project "Journalist's freedom (and obligation) of speech" studied how journalists working in Finnish mainstream newsrooms feel they have personal freedom of speech and opportunities to influence their media's political content or values. The results of the study are based on 30 semi-structured interviews conducted in 2012 and a survey (N=330) conducted in 2013.

It came out in the study that own ideation is still valued in the newsrooms, and journalists can change the angles of their stories when they wish. Most journalists think that the new, more collective way of doing is better than the old because discussing stories in progress will make them better and pick up mistakes, which can then be corrected.

In the newsrooms, there seems to be a strong consensus about the aims of the work and the appropriateness of making interpretations and taking stances in each journalistic genre. Stories are seldom shelved because of "wrong" opinions, and the journalists do not think that self-censorship is an issue. Nonetheless, the journalists acknowledge that they have to be cautious about provoking "the most conservative one-tenth" of the audience and that reporting on the business of their employers can be a "delicate issue." There seems not to be much tension between the reporters and the heads of the newsroom on these issues. Our interviewees also stated that the opinions presented in editorials do not restrict the spectrum of opinions in the news pages.

Finnish journalists think that they have an active role in news stories. They critically interpret sources' claims and make additional questions. All this involves journalist's active interpretation. In the survey, 93% of the respondents agreed, at least somewhat, with the statement that "the journalist cannot present things 'as they are,' because the framing, sources, and viewpoint of the story are always based on consideration." The journalists also said that they highlight social problems in their reports to encourage public debate. The journalists viewed interpretation not as a barrier to objectivity but as a necessary precondition for objectivity.

About the Speaker

Esa Reunanen has a background in media studies. His work has focused on the role of journalism in political public spheres. His present research concentrates on the mediatization of politics, especially on the interpretive and contextualizing power of journalism. He is currently working in the Institute for Advanced Social Research (IASR) at the University of Tampere.

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