Journalists as political fact-checkers:

Rethinking journalism's epistemic authority

Elisa Husu

Media and communication studies

Faculty of Social Sciences

University of Helsinki

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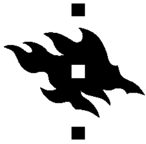

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During this century, political fact-checking has emerged as a novel genre in journalism to combat challenges to journalism's legitimacy crisis relating to political, economic, and social changes. In the new media ecology, journalism has lost its gatekeeper status and authority as the central information mediator, and journalists are increasingly coping with challenges of so-called fake news and disinformation. Political fact-checking reflects journalists' defense against the current situation where their fact-based discipline is constantly under reputation threat. However, journalists proceeding to judge whether politicians' predicated knowledge claims are verifiable facts, they confront their capabilities and shortcomings in making such judgements. Journalists directly deal with the essence of facts and their ability to place them in contexts. This study contributes to the field of journalism and fact-checking by employing an epistemological framework, which has only recently been reintroduced as a theoretical approach to journalism studies.

This thesis is a qualitative research with six semi-structured interviews with Finnish journalists to analyze journalists' sensemaking in the context of political fact-checking. The method applies discourse analysis to study the regular interpretative practices through which participants construct their fact-checking. In addition, the thesis analyzes emerging aspects of the journalists' epistemic authority based on their sensemaking performance.

The results indicate that journalists approach political fact-checking through problem-oriented and solution-oriented repertoires. Discourses within problem-oriented repertoires unveil several epistemological problems that journalists encounter as they proceed to judge politicians' claims as true or false: Political communication often creates difficulties to identify fact-based discourse, and journalists tend to lack evidence in convincing themselves of their judgement because facts may turn out to be unsettled on close inspection. Furthermore, social media that utilizes fact-checking can be problematic since journalistic fact-checks are taken out of their initial context. Within a solution-oriented repertoire, journalists construct methods to cope with these presented challenges. They advocate for more collaboration in the newsroom, involve colleagues in verification, and support making this process transparent to the public. This thesis approaches journalists' role as epistemic authorities critically: Journalistic fact-checking relies on collaborative context construction rather than on journalists' individual reasoning. Journalistic authority is to be distinct from political authority, and journalists defend their neutral role with the journalistic methods and values that guide their practice. Fact-checking is influenced not only by journalism's internal procedures and values, especially fairness, balance, and public service but also by the external institutional structures.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords

Political fact-checking, journalism, knowledge-production, social epistemology, epistemic authority, facts, objectivity, sensemaking, discourse analysis

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1. INTRODUCTION

Journalism has faced serious challenges stemming from economic, socio-technological, and political changes. Journalists aim at sustaining their authority as credible information mediators in the midst of the turmoil: The loss of this gatekeeping role has meant that journalists are competing with an endless number of other content-producers on the internet and that the aura of journalism as a central information provider has suffered. The economic crisis of journalism and new technologies have accelerated the pace of production, driving journalists to publish without adequate verification processes. The cuts in newsroom staff has further challenged journalists to maintain their content quality (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2016, 810). The concentration of media ownership leads to consideration of the ideological side of journalism and the autonomy of journalists to do their work without interference. The process of convergence has further enabled changes in the production, form, content, and consumption of journalism (Wilding et al. 2018). Political divides across the world have further challenged journalism as it has found itself in the middle of political disputes. All these factors make traditional journalistic authority a topic of concern (Carlson 2017, 2).

In the so-called "post-truth" era, journalism's central position in the democratic society is thus confronted with a legitimacy crisis. Post-truth implies a condition where seemingly proven facts become disputable (Kelkar 2019). It reflects the condition of the new media ecology, where journalism loses its monopoly as an information facilitator to wide range of alternative media. Professional journalism, traditionally considered as a truth-seeking discipline, has been dragged into political disputes where journalists are presented as political figures. This leads to their presumed neutrality and objectivity coming under attack. Journalists have invented new initiatives to respond to these attacks to save journalism's credibility in this new political environment.

One of the initiatives include political fact-checking, which aims at strengthening objective journalism. Political fact-checking seeks to improve political communication by focusing on the accuracy and truthfulness of public figures' speeches and comments. However, the risk is that by participating in factual analysis, separating truth and falsehood, journalism ventures into the political arena. How do the journalists evaluate their position to make such judgements in political fact-checking? How do the journalists

make sense of their sources in practice? Moreover, what are the implications regarding journalism's epistemic authority in this current moment?

Currently, scholars advocate for more research regarding the epistemology of journalism (Ekström & Westlund 2019, Ekström & Westlund 2020, Godler et al. 2020). As journalists are creating novel approaches and practices to innovate journalism in the digital era, they carry very different beliefs regarding epistemology. Is political fact-checking an outdated strategy (Marres 2018, 424) for journalists who strive them to secure the role of facts in public debate? How do journalists consider their ability to judge truth from falsehood?

This study examines journalists' sensemaking in the context of political fact-checking, a novel practice that professional journalists have adopted in the newsrooms globally. The aim is to explore journalists' sensemaking of politicians in practice. Focusing on their sensemaking process enables the study of how journalists formulate their epistemic stance towards knowledge claims and judge them as true or false. In addition, this study focuses on the emerging aspects of journalists' epistemic authority based on their sensemaking performance.

The specific research questions can be stated as follows:

RQ1: How do journalists make sense of epistemic problems in political fact-checking?

RQ2: What solutions do journalists offer for epistemic problems?

RQ3: How do sensemaking and solutions construct journalists' epistemic authority?

The thesis is divided into five chapters: introduction, theoretical framework, methodology, results, and discussion. After the introduction, the theoretical framework of social epistemology is presented. The theoretical framework is structured into two sections. The first section introduces journalism as a mode of knowledge. It examines the principle of journalistic objectivity that establishes journalism as a fact-based discipline. The sensemaking approach and the concept of epistemic authority are introduced. The second section addresses the current media ecology in which the fact-checking movement has emerged. Political fact-checking is presented as a novel genre of journalism. The practice is treated as a new genre that political journalists employ as a response to current

challenges in the newsrooms and democracy in sustaining their authority as legitimate knowledge-producers.

The methodology chapter introduces the study design, data analysis method, participants, data collection, and data analysis. This thesis is a qualitative study and contains six semi-structured interviews with Finnish political journalists. The chosen methodology is discourse analysis (DA). The theoretical background of DA is introduced and explained. In the following chapter, results are presented and linked to the theoretical framework of this thesis. The discussion examines the results and its further implications to journalism studies.

2. ACCESS TO REALITY: SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY OF NEWS

This chapter presents the theoretical framework of this study, which draws from the social epistemology of journalism. In the first section, classical accounts of how journalistic knowledge-production is defined theoretically are introduced. The second section presents social epistemology, where the focus is on the collective nature of knowledge production. It is followed by a discussion of the objectivity norm in which journalistic knowledge production is grounded. The genealogy of objectivity is presented to demonstrate how journalistic norms of practice has evolved. The last section presents the sensemaking process and introduces the concept of epistemic authority to help analyze knowledge production and status creation in journalism.

2.1 News as a mode of knowledge

News can be considered as knowledge (Park 1940), which differ from other knowledge-producing branches, such as science, history, and philosophy.[1] Walter Lippmann theorized knowledge according to the type of information journalists and social scientist produce, claiming major differences between them (Lippmann 1922). News were pieces of information that signalized events, whereas scientists produced comprehensive analyses with relational facts that enabled men to act (Lippmann 1922, 358). For Lippmann, the increasing complexity of society made this distinction all the more important: Citizens were unable to understand vital questions regarding the functioning of the world, resulting in stereotypical thinking that distincted them from experts. Journalists coped with increasing specialization that generated the demand to develop their practice. In Lippmann's account, journalism is presented as a basic form of knowledge (Undurraga 2018, 60) that can nevertheless be upgraded with rules of conduct: The reality may be depicted with methods that establishes journalism as its own

[1] Park identifies three types of scientific knowledge: philosophy and logic involved primarily with ideas; history examining events; and natural sciences concerned with things (Park 1940, 672).

discipline.[2] The demand for rigorous journalistic practice that sticks to objective facts reflects an environment where science became the highest virtue (Schudson 2001, 162).

Knowledge can be defined as ”acquintance with,” distinct from formal “knowledge about,” things.[3] In the pragmatist tradition, knowledge as “acquintance with” is intuitive, unsystematic, or something “common sense.” The knowledge of others and of human nature can be regarded as a general type since one can only know others the same way one knows oneself (Park 1940, 670). This kind of knowledge accumulates in time and is rooted in habits and customs and becomes embodied in instinct. In an unknown manner, it becomes part of human memory. This form of knowledge can be contrasted with “knowledge about,” which refers to systematic, formal, and rational knowledge, based on observation and on scrutinized facts that are put in the perspective of the investigator (Park 1940, 672). Contrary to knowledge as “acquintance with,” this knowledge form has empirical experiments to verify it, and thus problems and solutions can be communicated in understandable forms.

These two types of knowledges constitute a continuum where news finds its own location (Park 1940, 675). News has several characteristics that distinguishes it from other modes of knowledge: It prioritizes the unexpected; its quality is transient; and it is communicated in a manner that makes it easy to comprehend, share, repeat, and discuss (Ekström & Westlund 2019, 99). As Park indicates, the news has an ephemeral quality since it is in constant flux. News is a form of knowledge distinct from the three types of sciences previously described since it deals with events in a specific manner. Unlike history, news covers isolated events and does not seek to make relations between them (Park 1940, 675). News procedures aim not at determening essence (Tuchman 1978, 82) but instead focus on actual circumstance, and it makes predictions only if they relate to the present moment. It aims at receiving attention from the audience, and once recognized, it loses its appeal and becomes part of history. Unlike philosophy, news is not drawn from transcendent ideas but immediate events. Moreover, news is distinct from natural sciences, which is based on experiments of eternal laws in artificial settings. News are the unpredictable events in the present (Park 1940, 680).

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[2] Lippmann nevertheless believed endlessly in expertise in governing the society and he remained critical towards journalism’s knowledge-production.

[3] William James, The Principles of Psychology (New York: Henry Holt & Co., I896), I, 22I-22.

The possibility to consider journalism as a mode of knowledge depends on the significant theoretical shift that occurred in science in the twentieth century: The critical epistemologies in social sciences provided an alternative approach to the grand scientific paradigm of positivism (Menitsch 2018, 4). The whole paradigm of positivism emphasizes empirical method as the only valuable scientific method invented. Positivists use the dichotomy opposing objective facts and value judgements, rendering the latter as "subjective" expressions of preferences (Hempel 1965). Positivists deny any rational validity or meaning of the subjective that relate to human affairs. Facts, instead, are considered as objective and equivalent to truth (Munoz-Torres 2012, 571). Once the critical epistemologies emerged, the notion of the relativity of scientific truths challenged positivist paradigm. Thomas Kuhn's well-known assertion about social factors' influence on scientific beliefs highlights the new point of departure: Even objective considerations could never overcome disputes between competing theories (Kuhn 1962/1970). Different genres of discourses view reality in a distinct manner, and the criteria for valid argumentation for some may be unrecognizable to others. As discourses are directed to particular audiences, it becomes more difficult to determine an exact definition of knowledge.

Thus, the constructivist accounts of journalism have contributed much to the theoretical development of journalism's research, emerging in the mainstream scholarship (Godler et al. 2020, 214). Classical newsroom studies (Tuchman 1978; Gans 1978; Glasser & Essema 1985, 1989) have described the knowledge production of journalism and identified specific contexts in which journalists work, as well as the rituals, patterns, and rules that guide the practice. It is commonly accepted that journalists are unable to mirror reality; rather, journalists construct the news (Tuchman 1978) routinely according to commonly shared journalistic values. As anti-realists, stance toward objective facts is critical (Godler et al. 2020, 214): Rather, facts are determined by acceptance (Tuchman 1972, 667; Ericson 1998, 84) or social consensus (Gans 2004).

2.1.1 Social epistemology of news

When the object of study is the knowledge of news, one considers a whole enterprise in which people pursue truth as a collective. Whereas the tradition of Cartesian epistemology is individualistic and concerned with how individuals determine the facts and distinguish

true from false privately, the theory of social epistemology indicates that knowledge acquisition is a collective activity where individuals rely on other epistemic agents (Godler et al. 2020). What social epistemology indicates is that a large portion of truth seeking is directly or indirectly social in modern society: Knowledge is distributed within a large social cluster (Goldman 1999, 4). Social epistemology focuses on social paths to knowledge where intersubjectivity is central. Knowledge is thus generated in groups or systems in which individuals act.

Indeed, journalism studies is sociologically oriented as it focuses on institutionalized practices, norms, and roles in journalistic knowledge production (Ekström 2002; Ettema & Glasser, 1985; Carlson, 2017).[4] Its interest lies in the heart of social epistemology since knowledge is understood as a social phenomenon: Knowledge is articulated and justified in social contexts (Ekström 2002). As the institution of journalism can be considered a social system, one can argue that it produces particular forms of knowledge that enable ways to perceive and discuss current events. This character makes it distinct from other institutions,. such as education, public administration, and science (Ekström & Westlund 2019, 8). Social systems may also be regarded as epistemic systems that carry a wide variety of procedures, institutions, and patterns of interpersonal influence affecting its members (Whitcomb 2011, 13).

Although constructivist accounts take much space in classical journalism studies, it has a problematic relationship with central principles in journalism. One of them is truth. Postmodernists and social constructivists have deep skepticism regarding this notion. One of the founding fathers of social epistemology, Alvin Goldman, defends the concept of truth in the conceptual toolkit: It makes it possible to distinguish valid and invalid arguments from each other and defend meaningful reasoning of cognitive agents (Goldman 1999, 9). Truth is not abandoned and replaced by mere language games but instead requires some sort of correspondence with reality. The authority of journalism relies on the shared vision it uses to represent reality (Schudson & Anderson 2009). Journalists depend on the public's trust in journalistic accounts to be truthful regarding the world around them. Journalism, after all, is a fact-based discipline that claims to be

[4] Lately the self-presentation of journalism has been critized as scholars challenge the view of journalism's sedimented occupational ideology, professional culture and organizational structures. Instead, journalism is treated in a post-industrial and entrepreneurial context that is charactirized by atypical ways of working (Deutze & Witschge 2017)

truthful (Ekström & Westlund 2019, 11). Social epistemology enables individuals to acknowledge the biases and failures that appear when knowledge acquisition is social, while sticking with the principle of truth seeking (Godler et al. 2020, 214).

As journalism's relationship with knowledge is considered uncertain because of the lack of journalistic expertise in their subject matters (Undurraga 2018, 59), social epistemology enables individuals to take a meaningful look into journalistic knowledge production. The knowledge in journalism is co-created with sources (Reich & Godler 2017) that are testimony based (Godler et al. 2020, 217). Whereas the skepticism of knowledge in journalism stems from the issue of the uncertain nature of second-hand knowledge, social epistemology views testimony as a legitimate source of knowledge: It rejects the notion of a self-sufficient epistemic agent that arrives at knowledge with its own reasoning (Goldman 1999). Testimonies are regarded as benign sources that ground their legitimacy on trust (Godler et al. 2020, 219). Journalists rely on testimonies of lay people, experts, academics, and peers in their daily work as they usually lack specialization in some specific field. What social epistemology focuses on is the process in which these testimonies are trusted or untrusted: that is, the logic that guides journalists' knowledge acquisition.

Journalists rely on rules and standards they share regarding knowledge acquisition. As Schudson's extensive research on objectivity indicates, the norm has furthered journalists' understanding of themselves as professionals (Schudson 1978, 2001). Let us now consider how objectivity has served as a tool for journalists to defend their practice and methods of knowledge production.

2.1.2 Journalistic objectivity and institutional facts

There are several perspectives that challenge each other on how the objectivity norm emerged as a central principle of professional journalism. As Schudson notes, the objectivity norm has a point of origin (Schudson 2001, 150). The objectivity norm has been associated with the rise of new technological and economic conditions but also more often as a general social phenomenon where novel cultural ideals and norms occur

(Schudson 2001).[5] Before the twentieth century, newspapers ran by printers were mouthpieces of political parties, and printers self-identified themselves as small tradesman. Only when a distinct occupation of independent reporters emerged in the end of the nineteenth century that acted relative to their employees that a norm of objectivity emerged to enhance the social cohesion of the group. The institutionalization of journalistic practice came first and was followed by the objectivity norm that was articulated after World War 1.

In the early stages of journalism's institutionalization in the nineteenth century, news were advertised as facts about the world. Reporters considered their observations and evidence as facts that reflected reality. Reporters, in this sense, were realists who adopted a common sense approach to the world and empiricism as their method (Ward 2018, 67). New ways of collecting evidence emerged, such as interviewing (Schudson 2001, 157), emerged. The general belief was that reporters could report truthfully about the world as long as they relied on their empirical observations. Journalism evolved in practical discussions regarding good practice. Facts of experience legitimized journalists' claim to knowledge. Naive empiricism, thus, left out any consideration of how the belief was formulated (Ward 2018, 67).

As the communication field expanded and as public relations emerged during the Great War (Schudson 1978), journalism became challenged by the ambiguous nature of facts. Suddenly, journalists faced an increasing supply of ready-made content handed to them from the professionals that were dedicated to manufacturing consent. Walter Lippmann, one of the central proponents of objectivity, advocated for professional principles and rules of conduct for journalism in order to set criteria for the quality of news.[6] Lippmann designated the need for professional journalism in a modern society: Reporters were public observers of events and, therefore, needed critical education in order to guarantee the quality of news citizens depended upon (Lippmann 1920, 80). Journalism as an occupation needed public recognition and prestige, ensuring that journalists commit to

[5] Some scholars argue that objectivity emerged due to commercialization of the press as objective writing enabled printers to achieve larger audiences than partisan public. Others argue that objectivity norm is a product of technological change and derives from the invention of the telegraph (Schudson 2001, 150).
[6] Public relations became more influental in the United States than Europe at this point of history, and because of this development, journalists were more eager to adopt objectivity norm to distinguish themselves from public relations practitioners than European journalists (Schudson 2001, 166).

pursue quality in their work. The professional training would set standards for news, and the ideal of objective testimony would become a central tenet (Lippmann 1920, 82). The objectivity norm reflected the wider change in a society where science had become the highest virtue (Schudson 2001, 162) and established journalism alongside other empirical disciplines that lay claim to it (Gans 1979, 182).[7] Journalistic practice, thus, evolved from empiricism of fact to a rule-bound ideal and method of story construction (Ward 2018, 71).[8]

The inherent presumption of objectivity is that facts and values can be distinguished (Schudson 1978, 5). Moreover, this distinction is considered desirable. Facts are propositions about the world that withdraw from subjective preferences. Facts can be valuated independently (Schudson 1978, 5). Values, on the other hand, are individual preferences regarding a desired world: The subjective view is not considered legitimate. Objectivity can be regarded as a moral ideal, a set of reporting and editing practices, and an observable pattern of news writing (Schudson 2001, 149).

Nonetheless, scholars have recognized the limits of this "epistemological" account of objectivity. The idea of a neutral journalist that exercises detachment of values and opinions is considered as naive since brute facts are meaningless unless they are set in the wider context: Hence, facts are interpreted with the concepts and notions an individual holds, which are derived from theoretical assumptions (Munoz-Torres 2018, 573). Factual knowledge cannot be differentiated from subjective perception and from an individual's judgement. The epistemological account of objectivity sets ethical dimension aside: that is, how journalists' moral dignity is involved in the reporting practice (Munoz-Torres 2018, 570). Theoretically, there is a difference: Journalists can claim objectivity based on how they know "the facts," but this can be used in confrontational ways to make unethical reporting decisions.

Thus, the ethical account of objectivity has challenged the epistemological account as it emphasizes fairness and balance in journalistic practice. It aims at giving all sides equally

[7] However, Lippmann had always skepticism regarding journalism's ability to deliver its task. Rather, Lippmann saw media as vulnerable to manipulation and interest-based influence, which is the reason he put his belief in experts (Salgado 2018, 319)

[8] In its strictest interpretation, bylines were prohibited since it presumed that the report consists writer's point of views (Ward 2018, 71).

valid space to present their views without privilege. Objectivity is understood as an ethical question that values plurality of views: It emphasizes journalists' selection of issues, angles, and sources (Gans 1979, 182). News does not determine essence nor confirms axiomatic statements, but they uncover events. When the facticity in science is grounded in the processes of verification and replication, verification of facts in news can be regarded as a political and professional accomplishment (Tuchman 1978, 83).

The emphasis on the objectivity norm shifted in the 1950's as journalism underwent an "analytical turn" (Graves 2016, 63) that was influenced by several factors. The rising education levels of journalists led them to adopt more sophisticated, scientific methods to conduct reporting. The rise of the "critical culture" (Schudson 1978, 176) impacted journalists' attitudes towards the power-keeping elite and officials and encouraged them to report in a skeptical style. The "high modern journalism" (Hallin 1992), where journalists had strong bonds with the political and intellectual elite, faith in rationality and reason, changed as journalism entered into a new phase where co-operation was viewed more doubtfully. In addition, the analytical turn emerged as journalism's professional project advanced: Rather than recording events and acting as a transmitter, journalists were keen to make sense and interpret the world around them (Graves 2016, 65).

From the perspective of social epistemology, journalists' trust of the testimonies of their sources is crucial if they accept their accounts as factual. Arendt notes that factual truth relates to other epistemic agents as "it concerns events and circumstances in which many are involved; it is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy" (Arendt 1969, 7). Arendt's distinction between rational and factual truth sheds light on the struggle facing journalistic knowledge: Contrary to rational truths, the nature of factual truth is haphazard since facts could always have been otherwise (Arendt 1969, 9).[9] Facts get picked out of the chaos of events, and they are told from certain perspective. However, this does not mean that facts independent from interpretation and opinion do not exist. On the contrary, the dividing line exists. The focus of social epistemology is on this

[9] Arendt implies mathematical, scientific and philosophical truths as rational truth (Arendt 1969)

process, where facts turn into knowledge in human interaction and the division of opinion is created.

2.1.3 Sensemaking and epistemic authority

As has been stated, social epistemology is concerned with how knowledge is created in interactive processes between participants. This process is called sensemaking and can be regarded as a pathway to knowledge. Knowledge is the sense made at a specific point in time-space by someone (Dervin 1998, 36).[10] Sensemaking is thus an approach to understanding knowledge as a creation of groups of people, and it is reconceptualized from noun to verb (Dervin 1998). Sensemaking has many definitions, but they share the same notion that sensemaking is a discursive process of meaning-making (Gephart 1993, Weick et al. 2005). Gephart (1993, 1485) defines sensemaking specifically as "the discursive process of constructing and interpreting the social world." Meanings materialize, which means that sensemaking is an issue of language, talk, and communication: Situations, events, and organizations are talked into existence (Weick et al. 2005, 409).

However, sensemaking not only pays attention to the material embodiment of knowing but also focuses on the emotional framings of knowing (Dervin 1998, 42). Knowledge, in the Western tradition particularly, was thought to describe and fix up reality, providing answers and solutions as well as homogeneity; sensemaking emphasizes the process of ongoing interpretation or reasoning of a specific event, issue, or people. Sensemaking is regarded as a broader notion than decision making since it occurs between action and relies on interpretation instead of evaluation of choice (Weick et al. 2005). Sensemaking thus seeks to find meaning for an action: It aims at removing ambiguity.

Sensemaking can be approached as an individual's cognitive process or as a collective phenomenon (Telenius 2016, 20). Weickian tradition focuses specifically on individuals' cognitive process of sensemaking (e.g., Weick et al. 2005), but sensemaking has been studied in interactive situations where actual language use is centralized (e.g., Telenius 2016). Sensemaking is then understood as an intersubjective process instead of an

[10] Dervin and her colleagues have developed sensemaking since the 1970's (Dervin 1998, 45)

individual one (Bolander & Sandberg 2013). Approaches regarding collective sensemaking have benefits since its emphasis is on interaction between members and how collective sense is formulated ongoingly (Maitlis & Christianson 2014, 95-96). This study, although focusing on individual-level, interpretive acts of journalists and thus following Weickian tradition in analyzing journalists' sensemaking of sources, connects it to the theoretical framework of social epistemology, implying that sensemaking and knowledge production occur in an interactive process with the sources.

The concept of epistemic authority is closely related to the sensemaking process. The assumption behind epistemic authority is that knowledge is asymmetrical between participants in social situations. Knowledge can be shared and discussed in interactive situations, but epistemic authority is about possessing knowledge of an issue others lack (Telenius 2016, 43). Epistemic authority has relative control over rights to information as an object of interactional management (Heritage & Raymond 2005). Epistemic authority is thus related to power. It is a way to control whose view is acknowledged as more significant.

Following Popowicz, epistemic authority is understood in relational terms (Popowicz 2019, 15). Epistemic authorities can refer to experts who possess technical information in some domain (Zagzebski 2013, 5), but it is suggested that the concept of epistemic authority can be applied as an analytical concept in a broader sense.[11] It is argued here that epistemic authority may refer to someone who succeeds to make situations "rationally accountable to themselves and others" (Weick, 1993a/2001, 11), make others adopt the belief, implying that epistemic authority is influential. If there exists a reason to believe that another person's beliefs about some question are more truthful than what she has, Zagzebski argues that "the conscientious thing to do is to let the other person stand in for me" (Zagzebski 2013, 105).

More precisely, epistemic authority is "someone who does what I would do if I were more conscientious or better than I am at satisfying the aim of conscientiousness – getting the truth" (Zagzebski 2013, 109). The notion of *Preemption,* which both Zagzebski and Popowicz use in the epistemic realm, describes the normative power of epistemic

[11] Zagzebski argues that even expert can be regarded as authority only in a weak sense since the relationship between expert and her subject may be superficial (Zagzebski 2016, 5)

authority: If an epistemic authority makes a statement, one will believe that statement only on the basis of authoritative position (Popowicz 2019, 4).

Generally, the concept of authority itself is under dispute in a modern world where, according to Arendt, it has vanished (Arendt 1954).[12] Scholars in journalism studies have not considered relation between professionalism and authority, but Carlson addresses this topic by arguing that journalistic professionalism and authority are interconnected (Carlson 2017, 30). Since journalistic authority is not derived from specific knowledge of any discipline, which leads it to struggle with its professional status (Schudson & Anderson 2009), journalism's authority derives from its central position in democratic public life. Journalists use different practices to legitimate their everyday work: professional orientation, development of specific news forms, and the personal narratives they circulate to support a privileged social place (Carlson 2017).

In modern societies, journalism establishes its authority on factual and reliable information that it provides to the public (Ekström, Lewis & Westlund 2020). Access to news enable citizens to gain knowledge about the society around them, and news holds a special position in a functioning democracy as it scrutinizes issues of public concern (Donsbach 2014). If it is accepted that news provides general knowledge of the world that forms a space for communication and common actions, journalists can be understood as forming a "knowledge profession" in a modern society (Donsbach 2013, 666).

Lately, the concept of epistemic authority has become a major topic in social epistemology, where epistemic authority can also be understood as a collective (Croce 2019, 172). Journalists have a criterion for what can be considered as "good news" and revise them in practical discussions. Through rituals and rules of conduct, the belief in this form of knowledge is confirmed in the daily beat system (Ekström 2002, 270). Journalism derives its legitimacy from the credibility that is produced in the interaction between the sender and receiver: The credibility is established once both believe journalistic content to be true. The truthfulness of the information is evaluated according to how well journalists describe and interpret reality. Journalists use images, details of

[12] Arendt argues that as the assumption of an authentic and undisputable experiences common to all have disappeared, the concept of authority has become filled with controversy (Arendt 1954). For Zagzebski, the loss of authority is connected to the notion of autonomy (Zagzebski 2013, 2).

facts, and explanations for this type of approach to convince the viewer of truthfulness (Lisboa & Benetti 2015, 15). It is this combination that produces a level of certainty of the truthfulness of the journalistic report. The truth journalism strives for is always an approximation that sets it apart from exact science (Lisboa & Benetti 2015, 14). Thus, truth is viewed as an incomplete but valuable goal (Ward 2004). It acknowledges the shortages regarding verification (Godler & Reich 2013, 684) but nonetheless strives for it. The concept of epistemic authority enables researchers to focus on how journalists engage in sensemaking and the process of knowledge production.

In the newsroom, epistemic authority can be understood as a construction formulated among peers. Thus, epistemic authority is not only displayed and recognized in the embodied state, it is also dynamic by nature (Mondada 2013, 598). Epistemic authority can be challenged and negotiated depending on contexts. As Zagzebski states, epistemic authority is compatible with autonomy, but it is incoherent with epistemic self-reliance (Zagzebski 2013). Journalists differ, for example, in their access to sources or their position in organizations (Telenius 2016, 51). These resources can be shared to a certain extent among journalists in sensemaking processes (Usher & Ng 2020).

In this activity, power is shared in the community. However, epistemic authority does not depend only on better access to evidence than others, but it is also related to qualities one trusts consciously (Zagzebski 2013, 108). Trust is essential in order for epistemic authority to be formed: trust in the fact that someone is more progressive and skillful at getting the truth. As Popowicz suggests, epistemic authorities acted as exemplars of some epistemic practices and also possessed other virtues in addition to knowing (Popowicz 2019, 8). To be an epistemic authority is to have a tool of skills, abilities, and know-how regarding an epistemic practice and to have others act on these epistemic goods (Popowicz 2019, 9).

The construction of epistemic authority can also be understood as occurring between journalists and their sources. Journalists usually avoid considerations regarding their authority since it is understood as coming from news sources (Carlson 2017, 30). On the other hand, if focus is put on the process of collective sensemaking in the newsroom, journalists interpret their sources and decide ultimately the frame of the context. In this study, the focus is placed on journalists and their sensemaking of their sources, analyzing

how journalists adopt the role of epistemic authority in the context of political fact-checking.

In addition, journalists could be considered as epistemic authorities by the public. If an epistemic authority is conceptualized as an agent who has a significant influence on a subject's knowledge, journalists would likely fit into this concept if it is accepted that journalists provide general knowledge of the occurring events, which enables people to act. Nonetheless, the condition is that people believe this agent to possess characteristics that turns him or her into such an authority. That is why the discourse concerning the crisis of journalism (e.g., Williams 2017) is a challenge for journalism's credibility and authority.[13] Journalists report on events and issues out of reach to distant audiences, making the question of how news is constructed important. Objectivity has become one of the key tenets of journalism, emphasizing fact-based reporting and journalists' detachment from content.

However, partly because of professional ideology and objectivity standards, journalists are unreflective towards their fact-related practices that appear to be self-evident to them (Reich & Godler 2013, 95). After the emergence of web 2.0, journalism has been competing with different "truth-providers" who influence journalistic production, leading journalists to search for new ways to present their authority. As the pace of journalistic production accelerates in the digital environment, journalists adopt new norms to enhance their credibility, such as transparency (Karlsson 2011, 280). Novel tools and practices carry the potential to strengthen their status in the new epistemic context, where political polarization has led to the acceleration of alternative media (Marres 2018).

These new strategies may have very different implications for journalist sensemaking and the formulation of epistemic authority. The distance that once existed between journalism and its audience continues to shrink as the divide between the public and private disappears. This new epistemic context makes the authority of contemporary journalism uncertain, forcing journalists to become more self-reflexive about their position and to publicly articulate it to others (Carlson 2018, 1880). There are multiple initiatives utilized

[13] Actually the discourse concerning the crisis of journalism dates back to at least in the beginning of the 20th century. Journalism institution has faced credibility challenges ever since the emergence of the mass society.

by journalists to defend their authoritative status. Let us now turn to examine the practice of political fact-checking that has emerged as a new initiative in journalism globally.

2.2 Political fact-checking in journalism

This chapter introduces political fact-checking in the context of the new information ecology. It presents political fact-checking as a novel genre in journalistic knowledge production that aims to revitalize truth-seeking journalism. It indicates that political fact-checking developed from a reform movement to an established genre in journalism as a defense in the current epistemic space. The first section presents the epistemic context in which journalism currently operates. Then, it closely examines the practice of political fact-checking. The basic concepts of this theoretical field are provided. The distinction between internal fact-checking and political fact-checking is introduced as it is crucial regarding the research. Often, these concepts are intertwined, but it is argued that the distinction is essential to understand the features of political fact-checking. The last section presents the critiques of political fact-checking and evaluates the tension between this practice and professional journalism.

2.2.1 The break-down of the information monopoly

The epistemic space in which journalism currently operates is fragmented and filled with new forms and genres of communication: Entertainment talks shows, reality TV, and formats in the social media are examples of hybrid communication in which the line between fact and fiction is unclear (Salgado 2018, 320). On-going information flows where anyone can publish without restrictions are bringing epistemic questions to the fore: The emergence of fake news (Tandoc et al. 2018), the significant degree of misleading information (Benkler et al. 2018, 3), and accelerated disinformation have become phenomena that challenge the practices of the legacy media.

What Benkler et al. (2018) call the "epistemic crisis" refers to not only to the condition of the information ecosystem but also to a systemic crisis: that is, the legitimacy of the liberal democracy as a leading idea of the Western world. The role of the legacy media has been tied to the liberal democratic order that has been challenged by the populist right-

wing and far right parties in different continents at roughly the same time (Benkler et al. 2018, 4). Due to these occurences, Oxford Dictionaries World chose “post-truth” as the word of the year in 2016.[14] Post-truth refers to an epistemic situation where seemingly proven facts become disputable (Marres 2018). The term marks the polarization of political identities and alternative media ecosystems driven by conservative political forces (Kelkar 2019). The so-called post-truth era presents a turn of contemporary political discourse and contests journalism’s position as a central producer of shared communal knowledge (Carlson 2018, 1789). It can be regarded as a part of a wider sociohistoric process of truth-making in which dynamics of power and authority in civil society are reshaped (Tischauser & Benn 2019).

The institution of journalism thus comes face to face with forms of counter democracy, where citizens are embracing their role as active political agents (Rosanvallon 2008). Citizens are increasingly keen to monitor institutions of the democratic system. Instead of narrowly monitoring politicians and other policy makers, the suspicion is that it also targets journalism. Journalists ultimately decide and frame the news according to their editorial conventions. This process leads to a conceptual transition in journalism that can be seen, for example, in values embracing the norm of transparency instead of objectivity; it reflects the debate between institutional conventions, now displayed as distant and vague, and the digital environment still at its anarchical state.

In the new media ecology, the discourse on journalism’s crisis is intensified. The crisis is multidimensional regarding economic, sociotechnological, and political factors. As news organizations face economic crisis, journalists’ perception of themselves change: reduced staff and tighter deadlines, extensive information online, and the inability to deal with its effect on journalists’ self-understanding (Undurraga 2018). These factors are in contradiction to journalists’ perception of what comprises their authority: agenda setting, long-term scandal reporting, and interpretative opinion writing (Undurraga 2018, 65). Journalist authorship has been structured in its ability to gather and mediate institutional

[14] Oxford Dictionaries describes ’Post-truth’ as ”circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries 2016).

facts (Godler & Reich 2013), but in a fragmented and crowded public sphere, expertise is also delegitimized (Kelkar 2019, 88)

Journalism's authority is also challenged by sociotechnological factors. The loss of journalism's gatekeeping role has meant that journalists are competing with an endless number of other content producers on the internet and that the aura of journalism as a central information provider has diminished. In the new platform economy, Twitter and Facebook have become among the most successful media companies in the world and platforms for anyone to publish without restrictions. Platforms draw advertising revenues from journalism, leading to the further decline of journalism's business model (Harjuniemi 2020).

In addition, journalism is challenged by political forces. Since the financial crisis, populists have been at the forefront in attacks against the mainstream media as part of their political strategy. Mainstream media has been labelled as "the enemy of the people" (e.g., Balod & Hameleers 2019), serving "fake news" with "alternative facts" (Ward 2018), and journalists have encountered hatred and cynicism by politicians and the public (Kellner 2018). Utilizing the ubiquitous internet, right-wing politicians and parties disseminate political views in social media to global audiences. Populist right-wing politicians avail themselves of a range of platforms, whose inherent formats encourage simplification and emotional catchphrases. Social media has enabled populists across the world to undermine the institution of journalism (Van Dalen 2019). Trust in the mainstream media has decreased in several countries (Strömbäck et al. 2020, 139). At the same time, journalism itself can be seen as having a part in the decreasing trust. In the populist surge, tabloid journalism is an integral force in spreading exacerbating political content.[15]

Although economic, sociotechnological, and political factors all reshape the conditions in which journalists act, these challenges are not completely unique to journalism. Technological changes have affected journalism ever since its creation, and the economic model of journalism has had to adjust to these changes. Manufacturing and manipulating

[15] One of the examples is the historical Leave Campaign before the Brexit referendum in the UK where disinformation about the EU was published by the tabloid press in order to draw people's attention, putting primacy of emotions over facts and substantive information (Salgado 2018, 318).

information for political goals is not a novel practice; in fact, Arendt argues that it is as old as politics (Arendt 1972). According to her, "truthfulness has never been counted among the political virtues, and lies have always been regarded as justifiable tools in political dealings" (Arendt 1972, 4). For Arendt, "deliberate denial of factual truth" and the "capacity to change facts" carried serious threats regarding democratic public life: If citizens cannot accept common facts, their ability to act together may be lost. As contemporary information politics not only contests claims journalists make but also delegitimizes journalists making the claims, the institution of journalism is challenged to develop new arguments and practices to legitimize their judgement as valid (Carlson 2018). One of the initiatives has been political fact-checking.

2.2.2 Emergence of the fact-checking movement

Political fact-checking is a product of the analytical turn in journalism since the 1960s (Graves 2016, 56). The early stage of political fact-checking emerged as an influence of the critical culture and of major political events such as the Watergate scandal. As neoliberalism surged during the 1980s, journalists employed new tactics to monitor electorates. The invention of the "adwatch" reflected the modern version of political fact-checking, where journalists check campaign ads in order to correct misleading or false statements (Jarman 2016, 9).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century political fact-checking has slowly become a prevalent form of the fact-checking movement: a discernible practice especially during and after the US presidential election in 2004. Major fact-checking outlets emerged: Fact.Check.org in 2003 and Politi-Fact and the Washington Post's Fact Checker in 2007. The popularity of political fact-checking increased considerably during the 2016 US presidential election when Donald Trump weaponized his campaign against the mainstream media (Barrera et al. 2020). In 2020, fact-checking organizations have expanded globally as there are over 200 organizations in 78 countries monitoring claims of public figures to track misinformation.[16] In Finland, the first political fact-checking initiative, Faktabaari, was established during the European Parliament elections in 2014. The purpose of Faktabaari was to increase transparency, to bring political decision-

[16] https://reporterslab.org/tag/fact-checking-database/

making closer to citizens, and to improve citizens' democratic participation (Nieminen & Wiberg 2018, 215). Since then, it has fact-checked politicians in different national elections.

These fact-checking organizations share a vision that unites them. They look at the field of political communication through the same lenses and seek for change: People's minds, journalism, and political conversation are all in need of reformation (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 3). The common mission of political fact-checkers is to renew political journalism. In their view, the analytical turn in journalism has led to a paradox where journalists' criticism towards the political elite has now turned into a cynicism targeted at the whole establishment. Political journalists frame politics in problematic ways reflected in "horse race" coverage and "he said, she said" reporting (Graves 2016, 66). Framing politics as a game or a strategy enabled journalists to avoid an adversarial image, while spreading doubt about political figures and the political establishment among citizens.

Political fact-checkers' task is to overcome journalism's distorted habits and to, instead of concentrating on uncovering the game, focus on the actual speech of the political figures (Graves 2016, 60). Political fact-checkers aim at combatting mis- and disinformation that pollute political communication. In their tasks, political fact-checkers target two audiences: on the one hand, a broad democratic public that needs accurate information in order to guide their lives. Political fact-checking carries implicit assumption that a rational public aims to update their opinions on democratic issues regarding, for example, political campaigns or public policy (Jarman 2016). On the other hand, they target public figures and political journalists who they brand as belonging to "accountability journalism" (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 10). Political fact-checking can be regarded as an evolving tradition of objective journalism: It stems from a particular reading regarding journalism's history and, at least for some, it aims at revitalizing the objectivity norm (Graves 2016, 78).

Political fact-checking organizations build internet sites to transfer corrective information about politics to citizens. The organizations employ professional fact-checkers and journalists who target campaign ads and formal debates. Others focus on speeches, interviews, emails, flyers, press releases, and offhand comments. Professional journalists target their checks also to other political journalists to improve their reporting. Their aim

resonates with traditional journalists who seek to restore the democratic mission of journalism. Both are on the same side: They strive to revitalize the tradition of truth-seeking journalism (Graves & Konieczna 2015, 1977).[17] Thus, political fact-checking is part of the metajournalistic discourse in which the journalistic community evaluates boundaries and professional values, such as the objectivity norm (Graves 2016, 55).

Journalism communicates through genres that directs viewer's attention to the nature of the interaction (Ekström 2002, 277). Genres can be regarded as system of conventions, codes, and expectations (Feuer 1992). Different genres employ different rhetorical and discursive techniques that create an appeal to news as neutral accounts, where facts are reliable and the experts as sources are competent. This is how journalism constructs objective facts and authoritative knowledge regarding what has been referred to as "category entitlement": the idea that people of certain categories and in certain contexts are treated as knowledgeable (Potter 1996, 133). Utilizing new genres can help journalism attract audiences and renew reporting practices in the digital era. Political fact-checking can be regarded as a form of journalistic knowledge production as it involves journalists' epistemological challenges (Graves 2016, 69).

However, it remains contested whether political fact-checking can reach a wider audience: The visitors of political fact-checking sites are often more liberal, educated, and conscious of the news than those who do not frequent fact-checking sites (Gottfried et al. 2013, 1564). The more educated citizen, the lower the tolerance for negative campaigning, which increases the likelihood of adopting corrective messages (Fridkin et al. 2015). As a result, political fact-checking is not seen as making a prominent change in public opinion (Jarman 2016, 14). However, political fact-checkers, such as the three major fact-checking organizations and professional journalists, present themselves as nonpartisan analysts and have greater odds at reaching a wider public (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 8).

[17] Professional journalists have employed political fact-checking in their practice before: in the 1990's, journalists practiced "adwatch" that reacted to misleading political advertisements (Jarman 2016, 9). The term "adwatch" lost relevance over "factcheck" in the beginning of 21th century,

2.2.3 Political fact-checking in the newsrooms

Graves made an analytical distinction between internal fact-checking and political fact-checking (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 8). Internal fact-checking is a basic routine in journalism as journalists gather and verify information before publishing. Internal fact-checking aims at eliminating errors or mistakes from the source (Graves 2016, 7). This form of fact-checking is at the core of journalists' professionalism. It emerged as journalism increasingly professionalized and dissociated itself from political bias and began to utilize institutional facts when reporting on current events (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 8).

Political fact-checking, on the other hand, is a public act where journalists target specifically the speeches of public figures. Political fact-checking can focus on already reported speech, such as ads, journalist coverage, or public figures' performances in debates. Fact-checking can be conducted in different sets, in the newsroom, or as a live event. The practice can be episodic or a stabilized routine in the newsroom (Graves 2016, 9). The practice can be summarized as follows (Nieminen et al. 2017a, 307):

1. Identifying checkable claims
2. Finding a source to check the claim
3. Comparing the claim and the source
4. Judging the truthfulness of the claim

The focus of political fact-checking is on individual claims. Fact-checkers rely on expert sources, whether it be documents, comments or analysis, to interpret knowledge claims. When internal fact-checking happens privately in the newsrooms and aims at quoting the right source, political fact-checking makes a statement as to whether the quote is true (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 8). Fact-checking organizations visualize their findings using Truth-O-Meter. The scale ranges from true to false, with various interpretation in between.[18]

[18] The scale ranges from true, mostly true, half true, mostly false, and false. Some fact-checking organizations, such as PolitiFact, go beyond and use ”pants on fire” to debunk claims thought of as definitely false.

Journalists associate political fact-checking with a specific set of reporting routines and the stories created (Graves 2016, 24). It is becoming a new format of political news, aimed at elevating the traditional journalistic principle of truth-seeking (Graves & Glaisyer 2012, 8). However, political fact-checking can be regarded as risky for journalists as the practice demands them to take sides in political disputes: It lacks flexibility regarding truth-telling (Graves 2016, 68). The dominant frame of a fact-check is factual analysis where journalists reach a conclusion. Thus, journalists conducting political fact-checking encounter epistemological questions more often than their peers working in the beat system. Simple-sounding claims may turn into complex ones upon close inspection. The understanding of facts is usually associated with the correspondence theory of the truth where facts are true statements of the objective world existing independently from the mind.

In practice, everyday communication does not rely on precise definitions of concepts and words, and people may act with imperfect facts. Many things are ontologically subjective, such as borders that do not exist independently of our collective understanding. Borders are, however, epistemically objective: Their existence can be verified since they are a matter of a system of constitutive rules (Graves 2016, 71.). Thus, fact-making is collective by nature: The sociology of science has paid significant attention to how evidence is turned into “hard fact” that needs technical and discursive social work (Graves 2016, 72). Journalists encounter hidden inconsistencies and disagreements behind institutional arrangements as they conduct fact-checking.

Fact-checking can also be understood as an activity that complements the job of a beat reporter (Mena 2019, 659). Political fact-checking enables journalists to detach from daily routines and concentrate on single issues or statements of public figures. The genre differentiates from daily journalism in that journalists hold different role perceptions and epistemological insights (Graves and Konieczna 2015). For professional journalists, political fact-checking makes them reconsider their self-understanding in the changing political world. Professional journalists are used to relying on objectivity and detachment in their practice (Gans 1979, 183), and political fact-checking can be regarded as an evolving tradition of objective journalism (Graves 2016, 78). It is forcing journalists to re-evaluate their position as value-laded actors.

Instead of practicing traditional descriptive reporting (Gans 1979, 82), journalists as political fact-checkers call out public authorities. This leads to consideration of the following: First, since journalists are challenging politicians' public statements openly, it becomes questionable whether they can be differentiated from political actors (Graves 2016, 42). To fact-check politicians and public authorities, journalists make selections and therefore prefer some statements over others. Instead of making this selection a part of internal fact-checking, where the parts of the selection process is left inside the newsroom, political fact-checking searches for errors and judges them in public. This highlights the contradiction inherent in objectivity: Journalists aim at excluding values from reporting; however, they must make preference statements (Gans 1979, 182). Second, political fact-checking is supposed to be a form of factual analysis, where journalists concentrate on verifying one knowledge claim at a time. In a rigorous practice, statements are divided into sentences in order to define factuality precisely. However, journalists can make exceptions regarding the practice and modify the rules regarding fact-checking. These changes in rules may seem contradictive to practitioners and outsiders who support the scientific analysis of fact-checking. Let us now examine the criticism regarding political fact-checking.

2.2.4 Critique of political fact-checking

The criticism of fact-checking asserts that the practice dismisses the value-laden nature of political discourse as it determines to achieve factual conclusions about subjective opinions or ideology (Graves 2016, 519). Facts cannot be found in the sphere of politics; instead, the word "fact" should only be used to apply to hard, scientific facts that exist outside systems of value. These hard facts are in direct correspondence with the reality and are considered as indisputable. In political debates, facts are ambiguous and interpretative (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 163). The criticism targets five methodological challenges: selection effects, confounding multiple facts, making causality claims, predicting the future, and applying inexplicit selection criteria (Uscinski and Butler 2013, 164)

First, the criteria under which selection is done might vary between enterprises and news organizations doing political fact-checking. As Uscinski and Butler highlight, reasons for selecting particular statements for fact-checking might stem from commercial

imperatives that are far from rigorous practice (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 164). In this way, facts that are selected reflect what the fact-checker thinks audience prefer the most.

Second, fact-checkers may combine multiple facts into single factual statements, assuming that there exists a universe of all statements of facts. According to Uscinski and Butler, the premise is challenging since facts can be divided and handled differently depending on theoretical notions (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 166-167). In other words, context matters. As fact-checkers combine facts together, they aim at contextualizing reality. Contextualization is a subjective judgement, and for Uscinski and Butler, always legitimately contestable, especially in politics. Contextualization is based on incomplete information, which makes it disputable.

Third, political fact-checking often involves making causal claims, building relationships between facts. Social scientists are often unwilling to make interpretations of the relationships between variables, but if they do so, scientists employ methods that are usually unreachable to fact-checkers (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 169). Social scientists accept that causal relationships may have more or less support rather than be rated as true or false. By contrast, fact-checkers might utilize a true-false continuum deliberately.

Fourth, statements regarding future events are not verifiable since they have not happened. Thus, comparison between a statement and reality cannot be made, although fact-checkers sometimes do so (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 171). Even if fact-checkers valuate predictions and compare it to, for example, expert predictions, this approach is problematic: As Uscinski and Butler argue, fact-checkers can choose the source for which they compare the prediction, but this will not remove its disputableness (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 171).

Lastly, the absence of explicit standards for judging fact-checkers' evidence might make the practice ambiguous. Reviewing and comparing fact-checkers' work becomes difficult when it lacks such standards (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 172). Thus, the practice of fact-checking may be presented as ambiguous. Nonetheless, fact-checkers argue that they are aware of the ambiguous character of facts in politics (Graves 2017, 521). The particular interest in this thesis lies in investigating how political journalists proceed in political

fact-checking to judge between truth and falsehood when the genre contains these presented challenges.

Several other points can be added to the criteria, especially regarding the question of bias. As Nieminen & Wiberg state, relevant fact-checking aims at consistency and balance (Nieminen & Wiberg 2018, 217). Consistency means that journalists treat every claim according to the same criteria. Balance refers to the selection process in which journalists concentrate on all relevant parties and fact-check every one of them to avoid targeting a particular party. In this way, political fact-checkers prevent bias.

In addition, general criticism regarding so-called fact-checking tools and services warns of the problematic normative nature of these practices. Political fact-checking is an evolving genre that adopts technology to improve the practice. Automated fact-checking tools are presented as future possibilities helping journalism to combat disinformation (Thorne & Vlachos 2018). However, without a substantive understanding of the algorithms of the fact-checking tools, unnecessary hierarchies between knowledge and its presumed opposite, anti-knowledge, may be established (Marres 2018). Rather than establishing criteria between right and wrong facts, scholars argue for regulative measures regarding people and institutions who seek to enter in the public sphere (Kelkar 2019). Nonetheless, persistent critique of anti-elite movements regarding the authority of expertise is unlikely to disappear, which leads to consideration of how knowledge democracy is re-constructed: that is, how epistemically diverse viewpoints are treated within the public domain (Marres 2018, 440).

3. METHODOLOGY

This chapter introduces the methodology of this study. The first section begins by presenting the research design. This section offers insights on qualitative research and semi-structured interviews as an approach. The second section presents DA as a method. The key elements of DA are introduced and explained. The last section of this chapter introduces data and the process of data collection. Participants of the study are introduced and the process of data collection explained before moving into the analysis phase.

3.1 Research design

This study is a qualitative research, which focuses on understanding journalists' sensemaking in the context of political fact-checking. Qualitative research can be considered as specific researchers' mindset, where the analysis concerns qualitative factors of research phenomena (Barbour 2014, 3). Instead of looking at the phenomena from a "calculative mindset," a qualitative researcher aims at providing understanding of the creative process of social situations, unveiling mechanisms which link different variables together (Barbour 2014, 4). The researcher's aim is to reduce an abundance of observations into a concise group of observations, avoiding simplification while making distinctions (Alasuutari 1999, 43). It differs from quantitative research in its epistemological stand, where the nature of knowledge is not existing "out there" waiting for discovery; instead, it views knowledge as a social construction that arises through human interaction in social practices. Qualitative research is a reflexive and action-oriented tradition of social science (Galletta 2012, 1).

Qualitative research concentrates on explanations or accounts of those involved in the research, and centralizes individual experience. It investigates the elements of behavior through rigorous interpretation based on theoretical insights (Alasuutari 1999, 38). Qualitative research can form general structures or rules that emerge through the data. Reflexivity is salient in qualitative research: The articulation of researchers' thought processes, assumptions, and decision making strengthens research credibility. Since the researcher is affected by his or her disciplinary background, research experience, and life experiences, it is crucial that these factors are explicitly articulated in the research. This research is an inductive study, where reasoning moves from specific observations to

broader generalizations. Therefore, the data is approached in an open-minded manner without specific preconceptions of the findings. The aim is to formulate a theory based on the findings.

Semi-structured interviews were applied in this study. The semi-structured interview is a frequently used method by qualitative researchers, but researchers ultimately decide the level of interview structure they apply to their research (Galletta 2012, 22). While a structured interview grounds itself on a set of questions that are strict and straightforward, a semi-structured interview is based on open-ended questions, which leaves space for participants to reflect. The semi-structured interview was well-suited in this study since it enabled focusing on the topics that was considered important regarding journalists' undertaking fact-checking, but it also allowed participants to offer potentially new meanings to the practice. Semi-structured interviews are thus a flexible approach where the interview is designed to be interactive between the participant and the researcher.

Planning semi-structured interviews beforehand is considered important since the success of the interview relies on the researcher's knowledge of the subject. Researchers aim to formulate research questions in a way that connects to the purpose of the research. The researcher deliberately aims at in-depth accounts of the phenomenon under study (Galletta 2012, 45). In order to manage interaction during the interview, the researcher requires a careful plan to ask specific questions if the answers remain short. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask questions from the participants during the interview and potentially clarify issues regarding the subject under research. With a proper plan, the researcher can guide the participant with the right questions and encourage him or her to continue. Thus, the researcher steers participants through the interview, reflecting on participants' accounts and summarizing them to confirm his or her opinions. The purpose of the researcher is to listen to the participant carefully throughout the interview and to remain receptive to participants' accounts. Semi-structured interviews thus require good communication skills from the researcher since it is a practice in reciprocity between the researcher and the participant, allowing the researcher to scrutinize participants' meaning making and critical reflection (Galletta 2012, 24).

As this study aims to understand journalists' explanatory accounts in how they proceed in justifying the truthfulness of a claim, semi-structured interviews were well suited to

address the research questions. The effort was to explore how journalists proceed in fact-checking, focusing on the actual sensemaking process. The context is the novel practice of political fact-checking in which journalists aim to judge politicians' claims as true or false. Journalism was examined as a form of knowledge, and a historical account of journalism as a fact-based institution was provided. Political fact-checking as a practice has evolved in this context as a means for journalists to legitimize objective journalism and knowledge acquisition. Rather than relying on documents or journalistic coverage of journalists' accounts regarding fact-checking practice, semi-structured interviews enabled gathering insight into participants' narratives of experience. In addition, interviews made it possible to shed light on interviewees' complex descriptions in terms of contextualization (Galletta 2012, 9). Semi-structured interviews enabled participants to describe their sensemaking in their own words, allowing different perspectives to be explicated.

In addition, researchers conducting qualitative research with semi-structured interviews as an approach need to evaluate the ethical dimension of the research design and the interview situation (Houghton et al. 2010). Researchers require informed consent from participants to undertake the study (Houghton et al. 2010, 16). In this study, informed consent was received from the participants before the interviews. Confidential space for participants was provided where the subject under research could be discussed. Sufficient time for the interview allows participants to feel comfortable to participate in the study. After all, a semi-structured interview requires an adequate level of trust between the participant and the researcher to be productive. Such matters were all considered in the preparation of the interviews.

3.2 Discourse analysis (DA)

This study applies DA as its method of data analysis. DA derives from the philosophical strand of social constructivism. The central idea of social constructivism is that knowledge, reality, and its structures are formed through social and linguistic interaction. Language is perceived as a framework through which humans communicate and understand reality (Berger & Luckmann 1966). Social constructivists are interested in how individuals and groups participate in constructing common understanding of the world (Galbin 2014, 82). It departs from essentialism in the sense that it rejects things as

naturally given and questions the historical and social roots of phenomena: Knowledge and representations of the world are not merely reflections of the reality existing independently from the human mind but are rather the products of discourse (Gergen 1985). Social constructivists focus on the ways people categorize certain social phenomena and how they develop into institutionalized constructs and traditions shared by humans.

Although social constructivism covers multiple approaches, some key principles are shared by all these approaches. Social constructivists take a critical approach to taken-for-granted knowledge; historical and cultural specifity; links between knowledge and social processes; and links between knowledge and social action (Burr 1995, 3-5). First, social constructivists reject the notion of objective truth but insist that reality is accessible only through categories: that is, a range of discourses (Burr 1995, 3). Second, the representations of the world are always contingent and culturally specific. Therefore, it opposes the view of foundationalism that grounds knowledge on certain metatheoretical bases (Jørgensen & Phillips 2011, 5). Third, knowledge production is understood to be social, where common truths are formed through social interaction (Burr 1995, 4). Lastly, different social understandings lead to different outcomes in terms of social actions. Thus, knowledge has social consequences (Burr 1995, 5).

Committing to the social constructivist view of reality, DA approaches language as a medium through which socially interactive humans can talk and see the world (Potter & Wetherell 1998, 143). Discourse can be defined as an interrelated set of texts and the practices of production, dissemination, and reception, which create the particular object (Phillips & Hardy 2002, 3). DA focuses specifically on how language constructs the reality rather than on how it reflects it. Discourses have a functional character in that they constitute the world, supposing that the world is unknowable separately from the discourse. DA thus connects the text and discourse with the context. Instead of only investigating how language is constructed in the text, DA also takes into account the constructive effects of language. Its point of departure is in the acknowledgement that it is impossible to analyze discourses without analyzing broader contexts. Discourses on their own lack any meaning but are formed in social interactions and complex social structures (Phillips & Hardy 2002, 4). Rather than assuming any coherent picture of the social world, DA examines how ideas and objects are created and sustained over time.

DA thus understands language as having a functional character, which is used as a tool to get something done (Potter & Wetherell 1998, 18). Language constructs, repeats, and renews the reality (Jokinen et al. 1993).

DA is thus a systematic and structured analysis of the texts. DA analyzes the organisation of language above the sentence and focuses on larger linguistic units. With DA, the interest is to find specific patterns in language use in naturally-occurring texts (Jørgensen & Phillips 2011, 2). In the text, discourses can appear parallel with each other, revealing the multi-sided nature of a specific phenomenon. Hence, discourses are not freely floating meanings in the symbolic universe of signs but are related to each other. This is called interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1998). Hence, social reality is viewed as a field with competing and parallel set of discourses (Fairclough 1998). As Fairclough argues, discourses represent aspects of the world, the processes and relations of the material world, the "mental world" of thoughts and feelings, and the social world (Fairclough 2003, 124). As different discourses represent different perspectives on the world, discourses reflect different relations people have to the world: Discourses complement or compete with each other, and some discourses can rise to dominant positions (Fairclough 2003, 124).

Discourses can be identified at different levels of abstraction. For example, Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) introduce a highly abstractive discourse of the "new spirit of capitalism," which generates an articulation of discourses (Fairclough 2003, 133). The "new spirit of capitalism" represents real social processes in abstract terms. Discourses are internally variable, meaning that a set of commonalities can be identified; for example, in capitalist representations of political life. However, the idea of capitalism can differentiate from those representations. Some discourses become stabilized over time when groups of people share an understanding of them. These discourses contain a world of representations that get generalized, although holding a certain commonality and continuity in the way the world is represented (Fairclough 2003, 125). The degree of repetition of certain discourse will likely affect its commonality and stability. Not only do discourses have a representative function, they are also capable of projecting possible worlds, hence containing an opportunity for change.

DA departures from critical discourse analysis with its presumptions and data-driven approach (Jokinen et al. 1999). Unlike critical discourse analysis, DA does not hold emancipatory goals regarding the research, but approaches articulations in the corpus without preconceptions. Where critical discourse analysis produces a polemic picture of the social order, DA aims to classify social reality portrayed in the corpus in a manner as rigorous and detailed as possible (Jokinen et al. 1999, 86). With DA as a method, it is possible to approach complex epistemic problems journalists relate to fact-checking practice.

In this study, DA will be operationalized by utilizing interpretative repertoires, which can be understood as individual meaning systems (Potter & Wetherell 1998). Interpretative repertoires are composed of relatively internally consistent language units through which participants describe the phenomenon under research (Potter & Wetherell 1988, 171). These interpretative repertoires can be considered as key components of DA and are approached as building blocks participants use while they construct their view of some action or phenomenon (Potter & Wetherell 1988, 172). Interpretative repertoires are formulated around similar terms and expressions that are used in the same fashion by the participants. Within repertoires, participants describe the phenomenon under research from a particular view. Utilizing interpretative repertoires in this research allows identification of broader patterns participants use to construct their accounts regarding their sensemaking during fact-checking. Interpretative repertoires will not provide a complete picture of participants' descriptions, but it will allow concentration on the most dominant elements in the data.

After identifying key repertoires in the texts, the aim is to find common expressions within interpretative repertoires, which form dominant discourses. Here the interest is in different ways participants construct their sensemaking within particular repertoires but also focus is on the ways those discourses differ in structuring experience. Discourses are then approached as descriptive patterns of speech that participants produce within the repertoire. Thus, participants accounts are not approached as reflections of the reality but rather as ways to construct it.

3.3 Research context and participants

Potential participants were sourced on the internet from the beginning of May 2020. The purpose was to have an overall view of the fact-checking genre in Finland. Journalists working in mainstream news organizations who had conducted fact-checking were sought after since a major portion of earlier studies focused on bloggers or professional fact-checkers. For that reason, the first Finnish fact-checking initiative, Faktabaari, was excluded from the study, since it specialized in fact-checking, and journalists working in the organization devoted their time to the genre. While searching for the appropriate participants, contacts were made to the researcher's former journalist colleagues working at Kaleva to determine whether they had any tips regarding participants. At the same time, background information was gathered to find out how former colleagues approached fact-checking genre. This was considered to be important information regarding journalists' thoughts and attitudes to the genre.

After careful sourcing, four different news organization which had done fact-checking in the earlier elections in Finland were found: Yle, Helsingin Sanomat, Iltalehti, and Satakunnan Kansa. Yle is a Finnish broadcasting medium, which has conducted political fact-checking in several national elections, the latest ones being in the 2019 parliamentary elections and in the 2018 presidential elections. Helsingin Sanomat is the largest newspaper in Finland, and it has conducted political fact-checking in the 2018 presidential elections and occasionally outside of elections by individual journalists. Iltalehti is one of the largest tabloids in Finland, and Satakunnan Kansa is a regional newspaper in Pori, both of which are news organizations that are part of the Alma Media corporation. Alma Media conducted political fact-checking in 2018 presidential elections.

A group of four journalists in Yle were first contacted to request their participation in the study. Contacts were individually mailed information that includes an introduction of the researcher and the purpose of the study. Three of the journalists agreed to participate, and the interview time was scheduled. From there, contacts were made with individual journalists in Satakunnan Kansa, Helsingin Sanomat, and Iltalehti. After their acceptance, the interviews were scheduled. Due to the restrictions set up by the government because of the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online or on the phone. Interviews with a journalist from Yle and Iltalehti were held via phone; other interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1 presents the participants:

Table 1. Participants in the study

Organization	Participant	Career (years)	Experience in PFC
Yle (Group 1)	1	20+	PFC in parliamentary elections
	2	8	
	3	5	
Helsingin Sanomat	4	15	PFC individually
Satakunnan Kansa (Group 2)	5	8	PFC in presidential elections
Iltalehti (Group 2)	6	10	PFC in presidential elections

In order to have a proper sample, the chosen journalists worked in different news organizations. Participants were also from different age groups. Five of them were men, and one of them female. As Table 1 indicates, they were also in different stages of their career. All journalists had worked in the field for at least 4 years, the longest career was over 20 years. All of them worked as beat journalists, but some of them had experience in investigative reporting.

All the participants had personal experience with political fact-checking in the newsroom. It was considered important to have participants with subjective experience of the genre to obtain analytical accounts of the practice. If the data would contain interviews with journalists who had not yet conducted political fact-checking, their perceptions would be from an outsider perspective.

Three participants from Yle had conducted political fact-checking for three weeks before parliamentary elections in April 2019. Participants had a chance to form a micro team that focused solely on fact-checking those weeks before election day in April. The journalist in Helsingin Sanomat had conducted fact-checking individually in 2019, but the articles were separate pieces and did not refer to election content. Journalists in Alma Media had conducted political fact-checking in the 2018 presidential elections and, as with the journalists in Yle, formed a micro team of journalists who came from different newspapers across Finland to work together during the election period.

The way political fact-checking was executed differed between news organizations. Journalists in Yle decided to write articles of the fact-checks, which were published every Friday once a week. The articles contained multiple fact-checks which were considered the most important by journalists or the audience. The journalist in Helsingin Sanomat

had written articles that resembled "ad watch," where the claims in politician's ads were fact-checked. The two journalists in Alma Media conducted fact-checking in the live presidential election debate. All the interviewees had participated in political fact-checking voluntarily and had initial excitement for the practice.

3.4 Data collection

The semi-structured interviews were conducted during March–April in 2020. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. There were two themes in the interviews: first, how journalists proceeded in fact-checking in order to justify the truthfulness of a statement, and second, what journalists tend to learn professionally from fact-checking. Since DA focuses on the participants' perceptions and meaning-making of the things which they encounter, semi-structured interviews were well-suited to such analysis as it enabled the researcher to engage in a dialogue with the participants. In Table 2, examples of the interview questions are presented.

Table 2. Interview frame: journalists' sensemaking in the context of political fact-checking

Interview frame
A. Sensemaking process
1. What kind of thoughts did you have when you first heard about political fact-checking?
2. How did you conduct political fact-checking?
3. How did you select claims to check?
4. How easy was it to determine claims' truthfulness?
5. What did you do when you felt difficulty in assessing claims' truthfulness?
6. Would you use the word "lie" in political fact-checking? If not, why?
7. How did you experience political fact-checking?
8. What kind of challenges did you encounter? How did you overcome them?
9. Why is political fact-checking important in your view?
10. How comfortable did you feel with judging claims?
B. Learning process
11. What kind of things did you learn?
12. How would you continue with political fact-checking?
13. What kind of threats do you see in the practice?
14. What kind of possibilities exists?
15. Why has political fact-checking been invented?
16. What is the future of this practice in your view?

As Table 2 indicates, interview questions were quite general to provide participants space for reflexivity.[19] It is common for semi-structured interviews to be designed as cumulative and iterative (Galletta 2012, 72). The aim here was to hear participants' initial reactions and interpretations that could unveil a wide range of meanings. This would perhaps have been more difficult with explicit questions. The interview started with a general question about participants' thoughts on political fact-checking to begin the discussion. The first section concentrated on the practical side of fact-checking, where participants reflected on the proceeding towards the judgement of the claim. Step by step the researcher moved from participants' general thoughts on the issue to more specific questions. In this way, it was possible to gain an understanding of the possible contradictions or concerns participants may feel regarding fact-checking. If the participant had difficulty in responding to the question, the interviewer asked more specific question to encourage the participant to talk. This rarely happened, except on a few occasions when the participant had difficulty to decide where to start. These situations were managed quite appropriately since the researcher had become familiarized with the subject under research beforehand.

The second section included open-ended questions regarding participants' learning process of the practice. The aim here was to see how participants would go further with fact-checking. The pros and cons were looked from the participants and the aim was to clarify the points where journalists would act differently in the future. In addition, possible contradictions were searched in journalists' previous accounts to make journalists reflect on their earlier perceptions. Separating semi-structured interview into two sections was beneficial in that it helped participants to first construct their narratives in the first section, but it left space for clarification and additional meaning making in the second section (Galletta 2012, 72).

All the participants were eager to talk and open up regarding their personal experiences about the practice and the whole sensemaking process during fact-checking. It was acknowledged that participants might have left many things unsaid in order to provide a proper perception of themselves. Qualitative researchers who take semi-structured interview as an approach have to take this into account. Nonetheless, it was presupposed that participants were describing their views meaningfully and honestly.

[19] See appendix for full interview frame.

3.5 Data analysis

The data analysis began as soon as the interviews were conducted. First, the digital recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim into texts. It was followed by the first round of close reading to get familiarized with the data. As the interview questions were quite general and left space for journalists to bring up issues they regarded as salient in their sensemaking process, the first aim was to find commonalities in journalists' accounts. While reading, notes were made using color markers for coding. The coding enabled organizing and condensing a large body of data into manageable chunks that could be analyzed intensively.

Journalists' sensemaking during fact-checking emerged from the data as two categories: problem-oriented and solution-oriented. These became the key interpretative repertoires for guiding researcher's interpretation of the accounts. The decision was made to narrow the data based on these two repertoires since descriptions fitting these repertoires were dominant. Problem-oriented repertoires specified the first research question to focus on epistemic problems of journalistic fact-checking. Journalists approached the practice critically through these epistemic questions. As this was clarified, the focus shifted to identifying parts of the talk that represented epistemic problems related to the genre.

Reading was conducted again to identify similarities in the accounts. This is a common procedure in the data analysis phase: Researcher's constant return to the data helps to ensure meaning (Galletta 2012, 119). Frequently appearing terms or sentences were searched for from the data, which helped in formulating main categories containing similar expressions of journalists. Two themes were constructed within the problem-oriented repertoire, interpersonal factors and external factors, which became major discourses in the analysis phase.

In journalists' accounts, problems were emerging as they were searching right claims for fact-checking from politicians. Participants reflected extensively on the difficulties associated with assorting fact-based knowledge claims in politicians' discourses. In order to judge a claim as fact, journalists needed to find claims that they were able to verify properly. Journalists indicated that the problems of assorting claims from other articulations related to politicians' methods of representation. The epistemic problems occurred in the interactive situation between journalists and politicians. These epistemic

problems were related to politicians' representations (and journalists' difficulties in interpreting them) during interaction were named as interpersonal factors, forming the first major discourse.

Participants constructed another set of epistemic problems related to the aftermath of fact-checking. Although the aim of fact-checking politicians was to correct errors and misinformation in politicians' speeches, which could begin to circulate on the internet, journalists constructed fact-checking as lacking that influence. Rather, journalists constructed problems of how fact-checks were taken advantage of by users. Fact-checks were utilized by them on the social media for their own interest, and fact-checks were attached to their political messages. Fact-checking, in other words, appeared to serve users in political disputes. Circulating fact-checks on the social media was constructed as epistemic problems since fact-checks were taken out of their initial contexts. These accounts were named as external factors, forming the second major discourse.

Emerging solution-oriented repertoires helped to formulate the second research question and constructed the third theme. After having identified the first repertoire related to epistemic problems, transcripts were revisited to analyze how journalists talked about overcoming epistemic problems. Repetitive concepts, figures of speech, and metaphors were searched to signal a specific method of portraying solutions. At this point, research literature played a part in helping to find common concepts to formulate categories. Therefore, descriptions of the categories reflect not only the language used by journalists but also the researcher's understanding of media and communication research and sensemaking approaches. For example, the term 'transparency' appeared frequently in the context of solution-oriented repertoire in journalists' descriptions. It probably helped that the researcher was familiar with the concept from previous research literature (e.g. Ward 2014), which formed a background context to construct the results.

Based on these two major repertoires, it became possible to analyze emerging aspects of journalists' epistemic authority, which formulated the fourth theme. This part of the analysis was conducted lastly; hence, the analysis was influenced by previous findings in the data. Readings focused on finding implications about journalists' relation to the idea of authority as they made decisions between true and false claims. In other words, this

theme presented journalists' conceptions of their capacities to make legitimate judgements and present themselves as epistemic authorities.

Since DA relies on researcher's interpretations of the data, it was acknowledged as important to build transparent descriptions of the analysis phase. Extracts from the texts were presented to justify argumentation and to provide evidence of the interpretations (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Table 3 was excerpted from Tuomi & Sarajärvi's (2018) examples to introduce the process in which themes were categorized:

Table 3. Modification of Tuomi & Sarajärvi's (2018) example to process qualitative analysis

Original account	*Plain account*	*Subcategory*	*Main category*	*Theme*
"We couldn't know their intention to assume that they are deliberately fooling us."	An example of journalists' difficulty to interpret the source	Problem with exaggerations	Speaker's intention	Interpersonal factors
"If the fact-check comes out, for example, the next day, people have already formed their stance on that thing."	An example of journalist's account of the effect of political fact-checking	Problem with agenda setting	Epistemic effect	External factors
"We co-operated with our editing staff and producers since they were able to check our content critically as outsiders. They could recognize whether our judgement was justifiable or not."	An example of journalist's account of the benefits of working collectively	Collaborative measures for sensemaking	Collective sensemaking	Solutions to epistemic problems
"I think that the way we were able to reason our stance was pretty messy."	An example of journalist's criticism towards the group's ways of reasoning	Epistemic insecurity	Epistemic self-doubt	Epistemic authority

As Table 3 indicates, the analysis proceeded by taking original accounts from the texts and encapsulating their meanings into plain accounts. These accounts illustrated researcher's first-stage interpretations. From there, they were refined further by forming subcategories, further formulating broader categories reflecting researcher's continuing interpretation. Categories were then comprised into broader themes, which became major discourses of the study. Throughout the analysis phase, the researcher engaged in reflexive evaluation of her interpretations. She went back and forth with the data before settling with four themes. Critical self-reflection of the researcher's own role and interpretations of the results was considered salient, which was why the construction of main categories was provided.

4. RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the study. Each discourse will be explained with their respective categories, proceeded by analysis. First, journalists' perceptions of the epistemic problems in political fact-checking are addressed. Second, the solutions of these epistemic problems are presented. Lastly, how these perceptions impact on journalists' epistemic authority are considered.

4.1 Interpersonal factors

First major discourse emerged as interpersonal factors, where journalists described epistemic problems occurring during their interpretation of the politician. This discourse indicates epistemic problems journalists encountered while making sense of politicians' means of expressions as they proceeded to judge their claims' truthfulness. Three respective categories emerged as speaker's intention, accuracy of the claim, and lack of evidence. These categories bring out different dimensions that make journalists struggle to feel confident in their judgement.

4.1.1 Speaker's intention

One of the epistemic problems emerging in journalists' sensemaking of politicians concerned politicians' intentionality. Journalists described themselves as indecisive when selecting claims of politicians to fact-check, since they were uncertain about their seriousness. Often, journalists felt that the spontaneous character of the interview situation led politicians to speak unintentionally at times or to make exaggerations when caught up in the moment:

> *Politicians can exaggerate or make humorous remarks. Such as that the policies of the government are leading to years of famine. If we as journalists pick up that to fact-check it will make us look very odd. As if we couldn't understand that joke. The genre, then, is not serving the interest it should. (J4)*

In order for fact-checking to be meaningful, journalists would have be confident that politicians were serious in their statements so that the fact-check would be convincing.

As Zagzebski notes, epistemic trust in particular occasions is granted if the expectation of others assuming trustworthiness and conscientiousness is met (Zagzebski 2013, 123). Because of this difficulty in the sensemaking process, journalists were hesitant to place claims on the Truth-O-Meter used in political fact-checking. J2 indicated that the Truth-O-Meter was problematic in terms of categorizing the degree of truthfulness of claims since it could not prove politicians' intentionality:

> *We had to constantly remind ourselves that, with the Truth-O-Meter, we are only judging the truthfulness of the claim and not politician's intention. We couldn't know their intention to assume that they may be deliberately fooling us. (J2)*

As the previous example indicates, it was considered important to focus on judging the claim instead of judging the politicians' intention. The purpose of political fact-checking, he said, was to focus specifically on the claims' truthfulness and not on the politicians' character, and Truth-O- did not specify it enough. Every participant spoke about the problems regarding the meter. Because of the spontaneous nature of interviews, journalists believed that politicians might say something misleading unintentionally. This is referred to as "misinformation" where the speaker provides or spreads misleading information unconsciously. It is distinct from "disinformation" where misleading or false information is spread intentionally (Benkler et al. 2018, 24).

Journalists did not want to take a stance towards politicians' motives. However, in practice, fact-checking a politician might lead to the assumption that they did since journalists were contacted by politicians' themselves or by their teams. In taking care of their public image, politicians engaged in contacts that were regular and demanding. In particular, J1, J2, J3, and J4 when conducting fact-checking in the newsroom received criticized from politicians who presented their own sources on which they based their claim's evidence. Politicians and their teams demanded journalists to examine their evidence and to make corrections to the articles. Journalists described these contacts as frustrating: For example, the journalists in Yle described it as "tough negotiation" (J1), and J2 explained how contacts, either from politicians or citizens, followed every time they published a fact-check article. Journalists then had to react to these contacts and drop other work tasks they had at the time. J4 described an event in which a politician's team called the newsroom regarding a judgement in the Truth-O-Meter, which led to an

“obscene fight,” which was ridiculous in the journalist’s view. Journalists in Alma mentioned conflicts with politicians regarding journalist evidence in their fact-checks, which made them return to their documents. J6 described the conflict as an “absurd event,” where the politician had an intense need to be right. For that reason, the politician declared the fact-check as unacceptable. “It has come to this,” J6 described. Every journalist expressed frustration as they had to explicate their sensemaking to the politicians whom they had fact-checked.

Although journalists aimed at separating their judgement between the explicit claim and the character behind the claim, journalists often felt that they after all judged the politicians’ level of credibility. Journalists described how they were reluctant to make such judgements:

> *Political fact-checking targets only whether politicians are speaking truth or not. We as journalists shouldn’t make any further speculations on why they might not be speaking truth . . . It is not our job.* (J3)

One of the key research questions was how journalists perceived the usage of the term “lie” in political fact-checking. Journalists declared in unanimity that they refused to use the term in the practice. Previous research regarding the topic has had the same results (Mena 2019). Journalists refused to call out politicians for lying even though the claim was judged as misleading:

> *Politicians may present claims that are very obscure, in between the truth. They are using rhetoric that enable them to imply something but it will not be considered as a lie. That is one of the reasons why political fact-checking as a genre is so difficult because journalists are unable to approve anything on such claims. (J4)*

> *To call out a lie, the journalist must know the person is claiming something intentionally. When doing fact-checking, we as journalists are only analyzing the factuality of the sentence, and we cannot take a stance towards the person’s intention. (J2)*

Five out of six journalists perceived political fact-checking as a restraint genre since they lacked methods to judge politicians’ intentions behind the claim. Only one participant did not describe political fact-checking restraint. Other journalists reflected on the issue

concerning the possible bias of the genre: J5 refused to turn into a "straight-laced fact-checker" or to put himself in the role of an umpire. Political fact-checking was described as a humorless genre (J4). Humorlessness emerged as a problem since political communication contains several styles, such as satire and irony. J4 mentioned populist communication strategies that forced journalists to focus more properly on the nature of political communication. According to J4, political communication has become ambiguous and it often lead journalists to struggle in interpreting politicians' messages. The ambiguous nature of political communication was one of the factors that could lead to political fact-checking turning the journalist against himself:

> *Journalists should take a few steps back and think before they come out as serious-minded judges . . . Politicians like Halla-aho are constantly playing a game in which the mainstream media is against him, so journalists should think again before they pick up claims from him and begin to play that game. (J4)*

Journalists are required to know how platforms function in order to interpret the rules of the "game." Political fact-checking reflects partially the problems concerning the increasing entertainment factor of political communication: As politicians adopt several styles in their communication strategies, communication becomes more ambiguous, and journalists are constantly reacting under reputation threat as they interpret politicians. Studies indicate that fact-checking may be a reputation threat for journalists (Pingree et al. 2018, 1). As J3 indicated:

> *There comes a moment when you think what's the point with this fact-checking on politicians . . . Often they just use rhetorics and figures like Trump and are just all over the place . . . His defenders know that he is exaggerating but that does not stop some fact-checker from The Washington Post to declare he's wrong. We could ask, who cares and what's the point with this whole thing? (J3)*

The previous example indicates that journalist construct their position being in danger due to lack of journalistic discretion. The threat in political fact-checking is that journalists interpret humorous claims seriously and face bad publicity themselves.

4.1.2 Accuracy of the claim

The second epistemic problem emerging from journalists' accounts concerned the difficulty to separate strict knowledge claims from political rhetoric. As journalist fact-checking teams were established during the presidential and parliamentary elections, journalists indicated that it affected politicians: Journalists believed that politicians were more aware of their behavior and paid more attention to what they were about to say. This so-called "self-censoring", as J1 and J6 interpreted it, was taken as one of the benefits of political fact-checking to political communication. Especially in the presidential elections, where journalists formed a fact-checking team to monitor candidates' speeches, journalists observed that politicians' behaved more moderately. According to these journalists, this was partly due to presence of the fact-checking team.

All the journalists acknowledged that it was difficult to find clear knowledge claims in politicians' speeches and comments. Journalists described politicians as professional performers who had been trained by PR teams in the fluid use of rhetoric. They also perceived it difficult to find claims where any politician laid out a clear knowledge claim:

> *Rarely politicians said something so specific that we could immediately analyze it as fact-checkers. As journalists we couldn't fact-check something that had not been said out loud (J4)*

Here, J4 describes a problem when assessing knowledge claims in the politicians' comments: When selecting knowledge claims to fact-check, J4 avoided choosing ambiguous sounding claims. J5 and J6 in the Alma team were also critical of fact-checks that were not clear knowledge claims. Journalists in the Yle team shared a different view from their colleagues on the acceptable level of interpretation: J1, J2, and J3 stated that journalists' responsibility is to intervene in claims where politician might presuppose something that requires listeners to abandon some essential public fact. In these situations, claims can be future oriented although scientific criteria strictly forbid judging such claims. In this regard, journalists in the Yle team were ready to stretch boundaries between scientific and journalistic fact-checking criteria. Journalists referred to journalistic knowledge production that is characterized by incompleteness and constant self-reflexiveness. Journalists defended boundary stretching above all because of journalism's societal task, that is, its public service mission:

If our job as journalists is to serve the public, we as fact-checkers must look at the whole context in the debate. We should help our readers to define the most important aspects of the given issue and tell them about reliable sources. This may sometimes contradict what the politician has actually said, since we interpret his talk in a wider context. (J2)

As the previous example indicates, the public service mission, one of the core journalistic values (Deuze 2004), also directs fact-checking practice. For J2, the trustworthiness of claims must be tested against reliable evidence. Journalists make the decisions on which sources are counted as reliable: In social communities, such as news organizations, participants of the community share common beliefs and notions about things that enable the group to direct and plan forward their actions (Niiniluoto 2004, 306). According to Niiniluoto, this can be referred to as the "reflexive self-awareness of the group." In the newsrooms, contractual interpretations emerge among journalists of what sources are assessed as reliable.

In particular, journalists J1 and J2 were willing to take a broader role in interpreting knowledge claims than sticking strictly to factual claims. These journalists stated that the meaning of political fact-checking was to shed light on meaning. J5, J6, and J4 (who individually fact-checked) also viewed scientific criteria as rigid, but declared that they would rather stick with scientific ideals regarding the principle of factuality than interpreting ambiguous claims while fact-checking. Half of the participants in this study emphasized that journalists should minimize their interpretation regarding knowledge claims:

We had a scale with three categories: true, mostly true, and wrong. I thought it was suitable since, if we would judge claim's trustworthiness on scale ranging from four to ten, we would definitely lose it . . . As fact-checkers we shouldn't leave room for interpretation. (J6)

All the journalists indicated that in order to succeed with relevant fact-check and judging a claim's trustworthiness, the level of certainty ought to be high enough that journalists felt they were unable to reach such certainty. As journalists acknowledged their uncertainty regarding judgement, they felt under constant reputation threat:

It is very difficult to judge a claim's trustworthiness in any scale. Otherwise fact-checking would be easy. Of course it is difficult since we have to look at the

claim from multiple sides and, at the end of the day, you are the one who is taking the responsibility of that judgement. (J6)

All the journalists in this study were concerned about corrections regarding their fact-checks. Corrections were perceived as a possible reputation threat to both journalists themselves and the news organizations they represented. At best, political fact-checking was perceived as increasing the public's level of trust for news organization (J1), but only if corrections were avoided. All the journalists described political fact-checking as a challenging, slow, and difficult practice:

If we go on and on about some claim, we may just end up waiting for a level of certainty that does not exist. Sometimes we as journalists have to take risks, I believe it's part of journalism. We cannot aim at a perfect synthesis of the events such as history does. (J3)

Journalistic knowledge production contains risks, as J3 asserts, but the journalist was defending his decisions by referring to this risk-based context. Successful fact-checking demanded a level of certainty from journalists that they thought they were unable to achieve within the time-frame and methods available to them.

4.1.3 Lack of evidence

The third epistemic problem emerging from journalists' accounts concerned sufficiency of evidence. For journalists, solid evidence for news articles contained at least two independent sources: the persons' accounts or official documents. The condition of solid evidence is that these accounts make similar interpretations of the subject. Together, two sources form the basis for journalistic attestation. In practice, journalists felt that they were sometimes unable to make judgement about the trustworthiness of a claim based on two sources:

We had to leave some fact-checks out just before publishing because we came to the conclusion that our evidence was lacking. (J2)

Journalists described their experience of inadequacy regarding their performance. Journalists felt they were not checking enough (J1). As the interviewer asked specifically

how journalists knew that their judgement was based on solid evidence, two points were made concerning the sources' reliability and unity of evidence:

> *It is difficult to define the exact feeling when you know all the pieces are in place. It is about your gut feeling that everything is correct, sources are reliable and we as journalists can bring something new to this subject. (J3)*

One journalist tried to describe what was meant by unity of evidence: It turned out to be a difficult task. In this case, it could be understood as something Gaye Tuchman calls a "web of facticity." That is, every fact in the news article supports the whole and the whole ultimately supports every selected fact: Creating news is a sort of theoretical activity since news construct meaning of the world (Tuchman 1978, 87). Journalists aim at placing news into a larger context, fitting into a "general notion of how things are" (J6): that is, common sense. Justifiable judgement is not solely based on knowledge (what is truth) or ethics (what is right), but it always contains a perception of common sense, that is, general acceptability (Arendt 1982, 44).

Sufficiency of evidence, in journalists' view, was difficult to determine, since journalists lacked a general framework to conduct political fact-checking:

> *It was very difficult to determine whether we had pieces together since this was a pilot project . . . We didn't have a ready-made list as how to proceed in this.* (J6)

In journalists' view, they lacked a specific guidance of what the genre's "best practice" contained. Some journalists perceived this as a weakness of the editorial staff since the managing editor did not take a proper role giving directions to journalists. This increased the level of uncertainty of journalists conducting fact-checking. The lack of a general framework, from J2's perspective, also affected journalists on the group level where journalists described difficulties other participants experienced in shifting their mindset from the routines of the beat system to the practice of political fact-checking. This reflects the criticism of scholars that reviewing and comparing fact-checkers' work becomes difficult when the practice lacks such standards (Uscinski & Butler 2013, 172).

In general, journalists' reluctant attitude in judging politicians' knowledge of a claim's truthfulness might stem from their respectable stance towards politicians. Journalists

described politicians as moral figures (J1), decent people (J6), and credible actors (J4). Based on these views, journalists were cautious to address their trustworthiness:

> *The challenge of political fact-checking is that journalists make strong judgement on politicians. Although it is not about accusing of lying, but the journalists still declare that someone is wrong. (J2)*

> *The genre is fierce since the journalist judges politicians for not speaking the truth. Those are strong accusations that cannot be stated very easily without proper evidence. (J4)*

> *We may have one or two sources that give us a certain level of trust in our judgement, yet we are still not sure about the issue. (J6)*

As J4's description indicates, journalist hesitated to take a stance towards someone's truthfulness without certainty that would guarantee his notion justifiable. Journalists' level of certainty always depends on the context and issue. Thus, there are no specific requirements for realizing the subjective feeling of certainty.

4.2 External factors

Within the first research question, the second major discourse emerged as external factors. This discourse described journalists' views regarding the epistemic influence of political fact-checking. Journalists were unsure of how political fact-checking impacted the public or of whether the practice was in fact serving the mission it was supposed to: that is, to strengthen the perception of truth-seeking journalism. Journalists were unsure of whether political fact-checking was increasing or decreasing the level of trust in journalism. Two categories emerged as epistemic effect and twisted checks in which journalists constructed the effects of the practice.

4.2.1 Epistemic effect

In the second discourse of external factors, the fourth epistemic problem concerned the epistemic effect of political fact-checking. The aim of political fact-checking was to correct misleading and false information, but journalists expressed their concern of how

well the genre succeeded in this task. As Walter et al. (2019) also indicated, fact-checking is capable of correcting political misinformation to some degree, but it is also attenuated by people's preexisting ideology, knowledge, and beliefs. In the current media ecology, claims spread instantly without anyone checking the content. Disinformation spreads faster and wider on the internet than mainstream news does (Vosoughi et al. 2018). Although journalists would fact-check claims and judge them as false, journalists reckoned that people had already absorbed information and formulated their stance on the issue, as J4 described:

> *If the politician presents some boisterous claim in the live election event, followers will pick it up and put it on the social media. Claims spread so fast and fact-checking can take time. If the fact-check comes out, for example, next day, people have already formed their stance on that thing. (J4)*

Since journalists conducted political fact-checking in different forms, the relation between immediacy and time deadlines were different: Journalists in Yle could spend more time in a single claim because their deadlines for fact-checking articles were once a week. Journalists selected claims based on their meaningfulness to the public discussion, and journalists had more time in sensemaking than the journalists working in Alma Media. Journalists had selected once a week published fact-check article since it could offer a larger context of the significant issues occurring in the political debates. J2 was suspicious of how political fact-checking would work in the live-event due to time pressure:

> *The problem with live political fact-checking is that time is limited and the host can't get stuck with one claim. The show must go on. (J2)*

At the same time, these journalists had to give up on immediacy since fact-checked claims were already days old since being published. It remains unclear of how these fact-checking articles functioned as agenda setters or corrected public's perceptions of a claim's truthfulness.

Journalists in Alma Media had to fact-check simple-sounding claims because they conducted fact-checking in the live election debate. Therefore, fact-checks were immediately published in the middle of the debate. Usher (2018) suggest that this orientation to immediacy is central to the role that journalists sought to maintain as

authoritative truth tellers. News must be timely in order to not be outdated. However, journalists acknowledged that due to time pressure they had to select simple-sounding knowledge claims that were relatively easy to check during the debate:

> *The claim must sound easy in order for us to check it in the middle of the debate. There is no time to look for books. The information must be found reliably and quickly. (J6)*

Whereas the journalists in Yle aimed at capturing the public's attention by pointing out claims that were significantly channeling the debate, and in this way, developing context to claims to influence the public's views on the issue, journalists in Alma Media were conducting fact-checking as a more procedural task where claims were captured in the moment. In this way, the agenda-setting function could be realized by these journalists as claims were immediately judged and corrected.

All the journalists in this study indicated that the agenda-setting power of legacy journalism had diminished due to the rapid pace of social media content production:

> *Politics is faster than ever before. If a politician can bypass journalists as gatekeepers and publish their own content on the social media right away, we as journalists must check their content afterwards. Somebody's got to do it.* (J2)

Users can publish without a gatekeeper to check the content, and this has enabled the acceleration of content production to the point where journalists feel they are unable to compete. As the content is being published in the social media without authoritative checking, journalists' concern is that journalism transforms from being the agenda setter to being a responsive actor:

> *Our deadlines are already so tight and you have to edit the content and everything before publishing . . . We got to react quickly and get the content out. But we could always go back and do a rigorous fact-check afterwards. (J1)*

Both J2 and J1 viewed fact-checking as the responsibility that journalists had to do afterwards due to lack of gatekeepers on social media. At the same time, journalists believed this factor had implications regarding journalists' role as an agenda setters and instead turned them into plain responsive actors. This was described as an unpleasant development by journalists in the Alma team:

This slow, dull, gross fact-checking, which should be completely unnecessary is, for that reason, so necessary, since the social media is anything but fact-checking these days. Fact-checking exists because of social media. (J6)

Here, J6 asserts that journalistic practices were after all subordinate to technology development. Social media had radically changed the epistemic space where news organizations operate (Kelkar 2019), but as can be interpreted from J6's description, fact-checking slowed down journalistic production, which he viewed as negative.

4.2.2 Twisted checks

The fifth epistemic problem journalists were concerned of focused on ways audience used journalists' fact-checks on social media. While conducting fact-checking, journalists encouraged the audience to participate. Journalists in Yle opened up a service where audience could send claims that they wanted journalists to check, and the gathering process lasted throughout the three-week period they fact-checked politicians. Journalists in Alma Media also gathered claims, but in the live presidential debate, journalists lacked the time to reflect on the public's propositions. They had set up a screen where the public's messages appeared and picked up interesting and simple-sounding claims a few times during the debate. Journalists in both groups felt ambivalence towards public participation: On the one hand, journalists acknowledged that participation was a typical convention used in current journalism, which was also practiced in the genre of political fact-checking:

Audience participation is so trendy these days. It was inevitable that we adopt it in political fact-checking also. (J6)

On the other hand, journalists viewed claims skeptically. For example, J1 indicated claims as irrelevant since she believed they were influenced by political interests:

Most of those claims were useless. We thought they might be mobilized by a troll party or something . . . We didn't think they had anything to do with facts. (J1)

Journalists appeared to construct boundaries between professional journalism and amateur content producers. In journalists' descriptions, professional ethos was based on

journalistic selection criteria, routines, and procedures that legitimize journalistic content. As some journalists associated participating audience with activists, they enhanced their own professional status and unpartisanship. Journalists' general ambivalence towards political fact-checking might stem from the perceived threat that journalism is associated with activism, something journalists strictly opposed. This confirms findings in Mena's study (Mena 2019). For instance, J6 argued claims as problematic for these reasons:

> *People are trying to denounce their political opponents with our fact-checks. It's all about politics. (J6)*

Here, J6 refers to the public as activists who use fact-checks as strategic resources to further their interests. When the interviewer asked about the selection criteria of journalists, J6 asserted that he selected claims spontaneously due to the lack of proper framework in the fact-checking pilot. Journalists' descriptions indicated that journalism was in danger of becoming more scandal-driven: According to readership ratings, political fact-checking had wide and interested audience, which made its content suitable to be used as political weapons in the disputes occurring on social media. As professional journalist declared a judgement of politician's claim's truthfulness, political activists utilized them to further their own interest, as J2 described:

> *Political activists took our fact-checks to strengthen their own message, implying that we were on their side. And opponents took those fact-checks to debunk them. These activists did not ask for formal corrections, rather, they debated on them on social media to prove us wrong. (J2)*

As the previous example indicates, journalists were bypassed on social media, where people criticized fact-checks publicly. Journalists had to decide whether to make corrections even if they did not receive formal quests from readers. On the other hand, J2 assumed that it reflected the major influence of news organizations. He described specifically the development of the size and reputation of news organizations to the point where their every initiative were perceived as "thunder." Because of the increased resources and power of news organizations, journalists felt as if they have to be more careful about the things they participated in since they were concerned about their reputation.

All the journalists emphasized balance as a central value guiding the selection: Fact-checks ought to be approximately the same length and claims should be selected from every party to underline the balance of journalism. Journalistic balance also functioned to prevent journalists from using fact-checks to promote scandal journalism:

> *The threat of political journalism is nitpicking: hunting and clinging on wrong claims which will lead to scandal journalism (J2)*

J4 also talked about the dangers of scandal journalism: Journalists may pick up an acerbic claim and repeat it to the public:

> *Journalists pick up a scandalous claim and assist these forces by spreading the claim… In a way, journalists become a helping hand for them. (J4)*

The journalist's statement indicates that he may, on his behalf, strengthen interests that he is unaware of. If he decided to pick up a claim that is already questionable, journalist would participate in sharing and spreading the content forward in the form of a fact-check. Studies regarding fake news argue the media's role as being paradoxical: As fact-checking practices increase to respond to the challenge of so-called "fake news," mainstream media also participates in repeating and spreading the content they try to oppose (Tsfati et al. 2020). Although journalists work to correct claims they deem as false or misleading, the correcting effect on the public remains uncertain (Tsfati et al. 2020, 158). However, journalists indicated that their fact-checking was successful if it sparked conversations on social media. If journalists' fact-checks are eventually correct, processing them through conversations may improve the correcting effect; however, if journalists' fact-checks are not correct, processing may work against its purpose. As Tsfati et al. argues, journalists' willingness to correct false perceptions on fake news stems from journalists' societal task to act as watchdogs that ensure the quality of public discussion (Tsfati et al. 2020, 161).

The claims that the public sent were associated with activism, and all the journalists indicated that misinformation and disinformation had increased significantly during the last year:

Politicians can say whatever they want, even lie, and nobody seems to care. Maybe the newsrooms have awakened now that this is becoming a problem. Maybe we should take control of that thing. (J5)

Journalists' ambivalence towards political fact-checking was due to at least two issues: the lack of time and the shortage of resources. Journalists in Yle indicated that epistemic problems regarding fact-checking were a bigger problem than economic factors:

I felt often confused on how to go forward . . . Too much obscurity to handle alone. (J1)

Journalists' views may reflect their positions in the public service media, which is funded by state. Resources were not seen as a central factor to continue and develop the fact-checking genre; rather, epistemic problems regarding truth-telling contained inherent problems, which journalists struggled to overcome. Journalists in Alma Media and Helsingin Sanomat, working in the commercial media, emphasized economic factors and felt unable to successfully conduct political fact-checking so that it generated any value to themselves or the media company:

From my point of view, it's very obvious that commercial newspapers do not have resources that are required to do political fact-checking properly. (J5)

J6 argued that Finnish news organization could not sustain "heavy fact-checking machines":

Finnish news organizations will not put their resources to stiff and massive fact-checking departments in the future. (J6)

This section has illustrated journalists' problem-oriented approach to fact-checking, focusing on the epistemic problems journalist experienced while they fact-checked. Journalists' solution-oriented approach are discussed in the second research question.

4.3 Solutions to epistemic problems

Within the second research question, a third discourse emerged as solutions to epistemic problems. This discourse focused on how journalists sought solutions to these presented epistemic problems. Journalists engaged in self-reflexive evaluation on the insights on

improving their performance. Three respective categories were formulated and included collective sensemaking, increasing transparency, and strengthening professional integrity. Each of these categories indicated how journalists could solve tensions with epistemic problems related to journalistic fact-checking.

4.3.1 Collective sensemaking

In order for journalists to overcome epistemic problems, they would strengthen collective sensemaking in the newsroom. According to all the journalists, political fact-checking should be integrated into internal fact-checking processes which already exist in the newsrooms. Every journalist in this study indicated that Finnish newsrooms do not necessarily need separate fact-checking departments. For these journalists, professional journalism was characterized by constant verification of facts and they repeatedly went back to talking about internal processes in the newsroom: journalism ceases to exist without adequate verification process, as J4 asserted, forcing journalists to focus on strengthening newsroom's fact-checking routines. While conducting political fact-checking, journalists were able to notice weaknesses regarding regular internal fact-checking procedures. Journalists worked closely together, and they cross-checked each other's material. Instead of solely proofreading, journalists were able to focus on actual content: Journalists reflected together whether their judgements were trustworthy or not.[20] As Zagzebski argues, when different individuals make different mistakes, deliberation enables the community to check each other (Zagzebski 2013, 178). Since journalists were judging politicians' claims' of truthfulness, specific attention was paid to content:

> *We held meetings a couple of times a day and scrutinized whether claims were true, mostly true, or wrong. Everyone said their opinion concerning the case but, to avoid obscurity, we also consulted our boss about it. (J1)*
>
> *We co-operated with our editing staff and producers since they were able to check our content critically as outsiders. They could recognize whether our judgements were justifiable or not. (J2)*

[20] It should be noted that journalists in the group 1 and individually fact-checking J4 were capable of reflecting together more, since they were not fact-checking in a live event. In comparison, journalists in the group 2 were fact-checking in a live election event which forced them to make quicker decisions together.

Collective sensemaking slowed down internal fact-checking procedures which was acknowledged by all journalists. On the other hand, journalists emphasized the importance of adequate internal processes. Collective sensemaking enabled journalists to be heard by their peers:

> *We supported each other as a group while we were fact-checking. We had time to reflect together without interruptions.* (J1)

The importance of peer support emerged in other journalists' accounts. J2 talked about journalist's "blind spots" that needed to be eliminated during internal fact-checking. For J2, blind spots referred to journalist's unconscious aspirations that manifest in the text. Effective internal fact-checking aims at eliminating these aspirations as peers may spot them reading the text:

> *I can have more confidence if the colleagues have checked my content before publishing. My blind spots may have been noticed by them if they have critically read my text and asked questions about it. (J2)*

Instead of conducting internal fact-checking solely by themselves, collective sensemaking could improve journalists' trust towards each other and the choices they made regarding their work.

All the journalists returned to the importance of the internal fact-checking with which they described their working habits: systematic and diligent method central to the profession. Journalists perceived internal fact-checking so self-evident that they struggled to reflect on their everyday practice. This confirms the results of Reich & Godler regarding journalists' attitudes on verification (Reich & Godler 2013). Journalists returned constantly from political fact-checking back to the process of internal fact-checking:

> *Let's go back to our basic routine in the newsroom which is verification of facts . . . A person can't be called journalist if he or she does not understand what journalism is all about. It should be about facts and verification of facts. Every single day. (J6)*

> *The most important thing in our work is a proper internal fact-checking routine. (J5)*

The effectiveness of internal fact-checking reflected how quality standards were actualized in the newsroom. Although journalists can never reach perfection in practice, constant attention should be paid by the group to improve their work as the next example illustrates:

> *Internal fact-checking is viable to sustain our quality. The process, though, is never perfect and all news organizations make mistakes. It should be remembered that we can never be as good as we would like. Yet we are making constant effort to improve our process collectively. (J4)*

Improving collective sensemaking appeared to be one of the solutions to epistemic problems emerging in journalists' perceptions of their sources. However, strengthening internal processes is seen as an insufficient way to legitimize their work in the eyes of the public. For this, processes need to be explained to readers in order to be comprehensible for external scrutiny.

4.3.2 Increasing transparency

Participants described how epistemic problems emerging in political fact-checking could be eased by increasing measures of transparency. According to Voakes, transparency made the private processes of news gathering and editing public in an understandable manner (Voakes 2016, 2). Journalists increasingly justify their views as they get accused of backing the elite or producing "fake news" by public figures such as right-wing populist politicians (Van Dalen 2019, 7). Being transparent, the institution will be open about its processes and demonstrate how journalism should be performed. Journalists in this study indicated that transparency had a positive value that had gained attention in the newsroom in recent years. As epistemic insecurities have deepened due to the rapid communication flows in the digital sphere, journalists approached transparency as a tool to increase credibility in the eyes of the public:

> *Since journalists are constantly dealing with ambiguous and controversial things, we have to tell readers when we are unsure of something. Let's take covid-19 as an example . . . We are battling whether we can write about, say, the newest scientific discovery regarding the virus because the results are still uncertain. We've concluded that we can offer the best service to our readers*

> *when we talk about the uncertainty regarding our information, yet we can publish it. (J3)*

J3 connects transparency to journalistic values of publicity and public service. Transparency is usually connected to predetermined accountabilities and responsibilities, such as public service, as they form the basis to demand transparency (Ward 2018, 48). In J3's description, transparent reporting is a way to cope with uncertainty but, at the same time, it allows journalists to publish information that is yet to be verified in a proper manner. This refers to situations where adequate verification is practically seen as an impossible task: J3 refers to situations where scientific study can provide new information about some phenomena, but it may be information that has not been validated by the scientific community. It can be understood that J3 favors journalism that aims at fully informing the public even in cases where there is uncertainty in the journalistic community about whether or not to publish.

Three participants assessed transparency as a positive value acknowledged by newsrooms in which they work:

> *Our focus for the past few years has definitely been on transparency in our reporting . . . These measures are not taken solely for political fact-checking but is everywhere in our newsroom. It is definitely a good path. (J4)*

For these journalists, transparency is about making reporting material available to the public so that readers can follow what kind of decisions journalist made regarding sources in articles, as J6 describes:

> *We have to provide possibility to our readers to check the facts themselves. In my view, we must always link the sources we used to the articles so that readers have access to the facts we use (J6)*

It appears that J6 does not suppose that readers trust solely in journalists' judgements but want open processes in order to decide acceptability of sources themselves. J6 assumes that readers want to check sources themselves and therefore double-check the journalist's work. Because of this, journalists must provide "access to facts" as J6 describes. What this tells us about the journalists' self-understanding is that perhaps he does not believe that he has the authority to make statements about right facts, but he seeks credibility

through transparent procedures. However, journalists do not interpret transparency as a "magical concept," like Ward states (Ward 2014). Instead, they put the internal fact-checking process as first in their priorities. Increasing transparency in journalism is an insufficient method in and of itself to ensure credibility in the eyes of the public as suggested by J3's comment:

> *We can temporarily increase the transparency of our reporting with practices like political fact-checking but, at the end of the day, we should invest in improving internal fact-checking procedures in our newsrooms. (J3)*

This view reflects Ward's notion that transparency is not to be presented as a single solution to responsible journalism (Ward 2018, 45). At the same time, it is important to note that journalists interpret transparency here in a very limited way as only providing readers access to sources, when transparency could be extended by journalists to explain their decision making; for example, with "the story behind the story" sidebars. Journalists advocate for transparency in small measures, although it could be extended to internal journalistic processes regarding, for example, selection and editing, or to external factors concerning economic matters, such as ownership structures (Ward 2018, 51). It appears that instead of advocating for increased transparent measures regarding journalists' collective decisions, journalists emphasize individual responsibility in understanding the importance of verification in internal fact-checking processes.

4.3.3 Strengthening professional integrity

All the journalists emphasized the professionalism of Finnish journalists, which was reflected in their discourses regarding their abilities and certain journalistic know-how. Through their journalistic education, journalists appeared to have internalized a professional ideology regarding the "good practices" of journalism. Rules of conduct, in which standards of verification are included, are taught in journalism schools or in the newsroom, and these rules are followed by journalists regardless of the organization. This ethos of professionalism appeared to construct boundaries in journalists' perception of the difference between professional journalism and political fact-checking: The latter was presented as a "project" by almost all of the journalists, a genre that became relevant during the campaign cycle and that enabled journalists to detach themselves from daily

routines in the beat system. According to journalists, their colleagues were relatively unaware of them conducting political fact-checking, which may indicate, on the one hand, journalists' indifferent attitudes towards the genre, as J5 describes colleagues' views:

> *Colleagues were wondering why we needed this fact-checking project since we are doing fact-checking every day . . . (J5)*

On the other, it may indicate how individualism characterizes journalists' by fragmenting it into separate departments where mutual interaction is slight as J6 described:

> *Most of my colleagues didn't probably know that we had taken this genre in our newsroom.. When such a big company like ours is doing something like this, it usually concerns the participants and no one else . . . (J6)*

The "project talk" may reflect wider changes in the news organization culture where journalists are self-directed with different projects. Deuze & Witschge (2017) describe this as a "project ecology" in which journalism's organizational practices are understood as sets of projects where journalists work from time to time. Journalists adopt entrepreneurial ways of working, allying with teams inside and outside of newsrooms just as they do with political fact-checking. This could lead journalists to reconfigurate their self-image as professional journalists, as Ahva (2012) has suggested. By contrast, it appeared here that participants emphasized their professionalism, placing internal fact-checking at the core of their ethos:

> *The journalist can't call himself professional if he hasn't internalized that doing journalism equals checking facts. With every story, the journalist has to get the facts right*. (J6)

> *Journalism is nothing without fact-checking . . . It is the core of our job and every claim we make must be justifiable. It is the basis of our institution. (J4)*

As J4 concludes, every knowledge claim that journalists make must be justified. Journalists share an understanding of these justification activities since epistemic practices are more or less institutionalized (Ekström 2002). They share perceptions of their role, routines, and habits in the journalistic community, and an understanding of what makes the institution legitimate. Every participant relied on common journalistic rules of the 'good conduct' regarding use of sources, which legitimated their practices

since they succeed to fill the criteria. As Ettema and Glasser (1987) have indicated, knowledge claims are bureaucratically justified in daily reporting as journalists rely on pre-justified accounts of sources. They conclude that journalists thus "avoid responsibility for justifying their claims" (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, 159). This seems to suggest that there is a conflict between claims of journalism's professional epistemic autonomy and the "need to connect every assertion with an attributed source" (Carlson 2017, 141). Operating within new practice without a legitimate framework seemed to increase the self-reflexivity of participants regarding epistemic practices:

> *It made me more self-conscious as to what kind of journalistic choices I make each day . . . I am a lot more critical towards myself now. The critical attitude is necessary in a job like ours. (J2)*

As journalists in the first group were able to detach themselves from the rhythm of the daily beat system, they had more time to self-reflect on their practice and assumptions regarding their choices on sources. As J2 argued, journalists should increase their self-reflexivity regarding their daily choices made in the newsrooms. J1 emphasized this also:

> *I feel strongly that we must be critical and improve our fact-checking methods. (J1)*

Speaking in the plural, J1 referred to journalists in general as she demanded improvement to verification processes. It seemed that journalists not only demanded the upgrading of internal fact-checking practices organizational wise, but they also emphasized their role and performance: Verification and correction were portrayed in the literature as the essence of journalists' professionalism (Rosenstiel & Kovach, 2001). Journalists perceived that correcting manipulation and disinformation was an essential part of their work.

4.4 Emerging aspects of journalists' epistemic authority

Let us now consider what these presented results imply about journalism's epistemic authority. As has been suggested, epistemic authority can be regarded as having relative control over rights to information as an object of linguistic and interactional management

(Heritage & Raymond, 2005). The assumption behind epistemic authority is that knowledge is asymmetrical between participants in social situations: Knowledge can be shared and articulated, but epistemic authority is about possessing knowledge of an issue others lack knowledge of (Telenius 2016, 43). Therefore, epistemic authority is a person or a collective who is perceived as a knower, and others are willing to adopt this authority's belief. Epistemic authority possesses skills, abilities, and know-how regarding an epistemic practice (Popowicz 2019, 9), which make others trust in the authority's views.

The results of this study indicate that journalists are critical towards their role as epistemic authorities. Making judgements on a sources' claims of truthfulness indicates that journalists act as epistemic authorities, holding knowledge of an issue that give them reason to determine claims as true or false. However, it seems that journalists' criticism of such a role stems from epistemic challenges they face during the sensemaking of their sources. This was reflected in three ways: first, in journalists' epistemic self-doubt; second, in their rejection of the normative stance; and third, in their unwillingness to be political authorities.

4.4.1 Epistemic self-doubt

The self-doubt of journalists emerged during sensemaking as journalists aimed at determining the level of truthfulness of politicians' claims. Journalists' self-doubt may have decreased their self-trust, leading journalists to be skeptical about their epistemic faculties to get to the truth (Zagzebski 2013, 36). Journalists often felt a lack of trust towards themselves and their peers to make such judgements regarding truthfulness of politicians' claims:

> *It became a long story and we just pondered on it, thinking of how to say this . . . And me and my colleagues couldn't reach a conclusion whether the claim was true or not* (J3)

> *I think that the way we were able to reason our stance was pretty messy.* (J5)

Journalists described their uncertain feelings during sensemaking as they aimed at reaching conclusion about their judgement. As one of the participants declared, she wondered afterwards whether her verification reflected the standards:

> *I had a guilty conscience after publishing, whether I had checked enough . . . (J1)*

For that reason, journalists presented their readiness to hear politicians' evidence regarding the claim, implying that journalists were willing to negotiate their epistemic stance regarding their judgement:

> *We allowed politicians to comment on our evidence before publishing just in case if he had a source for it that we hadn't found. We did this to avoid any speculation afterwards whether our source was good or not. If we asked the politician first, we could estimate whether the source was trustworthy, or maybe the politician just accidentally said something misleading.* (J2)

The journalist appeared critical towards his fact-checking process since he recognized he might have missed something while searching for sufficient evidence. Moreover, the journalist acknowledged that the politician might have accidentally spelled out something that might have misled the journalist. It should be noted, however, that only the journalists in Yle and Helsingin Sanomat were able to contact politicians before publishing since they were not conducting political fact-checking in a live election event like their colleagues J5 and J6. It appeared that these journalists who had more time in their sensemaking process felt more self-conscious about judging politicians' claims without adequate response from politicians before publishing. The journalists' constructive approach indicated that they were receptive of politicians' views, and this tendency appeared in their willingness to make corrections for them:

> *Some politician's assistant called in the evening and we fought a long time over that Truth-O-Meter. The assistant wanted us to change it, and eventually we did. (J1)*

> *One of the politician's assistant demanded that we altered our judgement after publishing. We debated over that for a good amount of time and eventually made corrections to the article. (J4)*

Thus, the epistemic authority of journalists was temporal since journalists did alter their judgement if they reckoned that their stance was not justifiable. From another perspective, politicians were not willing to adopt journalists' stances uncritically, but they challenged them through negotiation. This displaces the pre-emption thesis, which indicates that when an epistemic authority makes a statement, one ought to believe that statement on the basis of the authority position (Popowicz 2019, 4). Journalists were more willing to co-operate with politicians to find acceptable solutions for each side.

4.4.2 Rejection of the normative stance

In the system of liberal democracy, the institution of journalism is separated from the domain of science and politics, and journalists' essential role is to act as public critiques towards the political institution and their representatives. However, deciding publicly whether politicians were speaking truth or falsehood, journalists should go further than merely being critical of them: They should made judgements regarding which facts can be considered legitimate at all. This normativity regarding their journalistic work was approached skeptically by J4, J5, and J6:

> *I think our job is to bring the facts to the audience but leave interpretations of those facts to them. We should not push for any stance as the right one. (J5)*

If journalists would take an epistemic stance towards "right facts" and aim at gaining normative power essential to their authority (Zagzebski 2013, 102), journalists would make selection of which facts ought to be displayed in the public domain. As the previous example suggests, the journalist and his colleagues hesitated to take a normative stance towards the facts.

However, it should be noted that the rejection of normativity was not completely shared among participants, as the next example indicates:

> *The journalist's job is not solely to report on what some politician says but to interpret the meaning of what has been said. Then we are always making an interpretation; yet we must challenge our own views constantly. (J2)*

As the example illustrates, J2 strongly challenged the assumption that journalists should be perceived only as information mediators; rather, their epistemic skills should be put in use to interpret the facts in a wider context. This reflected the views of J1, J2, and J3. This could be partly due to the fact-checking format, which allowed more time for journalists in Yle to select facts they considered most important.

Not only did epistemic problems in the sensemaking process decrease journalists' willingness to take a clear epistemic stance towards the claim, but political culture was likely to pull back journalists from taking a judgmental stance towards politicians. All the journalists acknowledged the influence of Anglo-American media in Finnish journalism: Journalists applied a variety of practices and techniques from their foreign colleagues, with political fact-checking being an example of this tendency. At the same time, due to very different media and political systems, as Hallin & Mancini (2004) have addressed, journalists indicated that some trends were unsuitable for their norms and habits. All the journalists argued that political fact-checking was mainly a product of a populist surge in the United States, and the success of Donald Trump had made journalists all over the world rethink how to respond to the new order. Although presenting critical attitudes towards power-holding politicians, Finnish journalists were receptive towards politicians' views and described decision makers as merely credible and reasonable figures:

> *In our political culture there is a strong assumption that ministers are speaking the truth and we must trust in them. So because of that, we as journalists can't judge their truthfulness very lightly . . .* (J4)
>
> *The politicians in our country behave quite morally . . .* (J1)

If journalists would be epistemically self-reliant, they would be unmoved by disagreement with politicians (Zagzebski 2013, 204). Journalists would then trust their reasoning and evidence, and they would not become confused by the evidence of non-authorities. However, journalists' willingness to hear politicians and adopt their evidence might reflect their perceived status as non-authorities: The authority relies rather on news sources (Carlson 2017, 30). This makes the genre of political fact-checking more difficult to execute since it relies on the idea that journalists are making the judgement of the claims' truthfulness individually or collectively as a group, and their judgement could be adopted by others because their epistemic know-how and skills can get them to truth.

4.4.3 Unwillingness to be a political authority

Nonetheless, participants' general skepticism regarding their work's normativity may stem from the fact that journalists could be perceived as playing the role of a political authority. The willingness to hear politicians may have neutralized their role since journalists avoided any assumptions that they were intruding into the domain of politics:

> *There is definitely a risk that journalists are beginning to look like political actors and active participants as they judge politicians as fact-checkers . . . That risk is real.* (J4)

> *We followed the guidelines to conduct unbiased fact-checking, yet, according to some feedback, at times we failed to deliver. We were furious when we heard that. (J1)*

As these examples indicate, journalists were skeptical of being perceived as political actors but instead aimed at sustaining their role as unbiased fact-checkers. Yet the journalists were unsure of how to make judgements of politicians' claims without taking an active role deciding between acceptable and unacceptable facts. However, it seemed that journalists do carry normative assumptions about "right facts", which they contradict with the so-called "fake news":

> *Fact-checkers aim at sustaining trust in the knowledge produced by institutional actors such as bureaucrats and officials . . . They fight against fake news and manipulation so they would not govern our world. Fact-checkers aim at truth.* (J1)

Fact-checkers are thus presented as sides reaching for truth, whereas their opponents are those who deliberately manipulate and produce content that does not correspond with reality. All the journalists in this study did agree that fact-checking practices and tools could be valuable for mainstream journalism against challenges of mis- and disinformation on the internet. It appears that specific attention should be paid on how journalism's epistemic authority is constructed in relation to different sources and communities on the internet, which are perceived as "fake news" by journalists. Following Marres, fake news communities can be understood from the normative opposition between "literate" and "illiterate" sources or reflexively, recognizing the normative hierarchy of "knowing" and "unknowing" subjects (Marres 2018, 433). It may

be that due to the fact that strong assumptions about fake news and its proliferation exists, journalists hesitate to use strong judgements on political representatives in order to not mix claims of political representatives and fake news phenomena with each other.

As Marres argues, although common public facts are still as important than ever because they lay the ground for political action and public discussion, the genre of “fact” may be undergoing transformation (Marres 2018, 440). According to Marres, there is no need to declare an end to the normative project of establishing hierarchies of epistemic value (Marres 2018, 440), but there may be a need to rethink traditional validation mechanisms of public facts. Different fact-checking tools and practices tend to divide public information into legitimate and illegitimate claims, but in the current information ecology, this kind of politics of demarcation can be considered problematic (Marres 2018, 438). Fact-checking practices may be justified by its appeal to authority or expert knowledge, which remain an inaccessible realm beyond the public, making fact-checkers a target of different anti-elite movements (Marres 2018, 440). Thus, it may come across as if journalists are struggling to hold any epistemic authority in the current media ecology: The information environment is based on an egalitarian ideal where anyone can practically publish without restrictions. This leads to a situation where journalists’ interpretations and statements can be constantly contested. In addition, the idea of the objectivity of mainstream media institutions is questioned (Kelkar 2019). Marres thus argues that epistemic authority is earned through an exchange between epistemically diverse viewpoints (Marres 2018, 441). Therefore, fact-checking may only provide some help in competing against disinformation in the online world: As Marres argues, checking public statements’ correspondence with known facts will not vanish the class of statements that, although not fitting with certified knowledge, will help the progress of new empirical truths. That being said, novel ways of validating public facts will not rely solely on the role of public authority, but validation needs to be reconfigured to be epistemically more acceptable. If the legitimacy of validation will be drawn by transparent processing, the legitimacy of the algorithmic judgement is also likely to center in such debates.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to shed light on Finnish journalists conducting political fact-checking, focusing on how journalists proceed in judging politicians' claims as true or false. The interest of this study was on explanatory accounts of journalists' sensemaking and on analyzing emerging epistemic problems to illustrate challenges journalists encounter in fact-checking. In addition, the findings of this study provided solutions to epistemic problems. Lastly, the question of journalism's epistemic authority was addressed in order to analyze how journalists perceive their role as knowing authorities in fact-checking.

As the journalists in this study proceeded to judge politicians' claims as true or false, they encountered several epistemic problems, which made them question whether claims can be stated as facts at all. Journalism's central tenet of objectivity would imply that journalists are capable of reducing personal values from their work and judging truthfulness of a claim as how well it corresponds with reality. As the results of this study indicate, journalistic fact-checking is dependent on journalists' contextual construction of facts: Interpretative challenges exist in fact-checking and demand problem solving from journalists. Therefore, journalists cope with uncertainty. Journalists' reasoning always occurs in specific contexts. In the sensemaking process, journalists need to overcome different epistemic challenges in order to successfully conduct the practice.

The results indicate that journalists relate to fact-checking in two ways: on the one hand, journalists need novel tools to combat disinformation and so-called fake news to legitimize news as trustworthy information for citizens. Political fact-checking aims at underlining the task of journalists as truthful information mediators. On the other hand, fact-checking demands rigorous certainty from journalists in order to judge true from false. According to the results, journalists are often unable to achieve this level of certainty. For this reason, journalists are willing to involve politicians themselves in their fact-checking procedure. With journalist restricted by time limits, contacting politicians about their claims enables politicians to affect the end result. At times, journalists are willing to change their judgement regarding the claim if the politician can provide a source to the journalist that the journalist considers legitimate. Fact-checking thus confirms the previous findings that facts are determined through acceptance (Tuchman 1972) or social consensus (Gans 2004).

Journalists' role as epistemic authorities is thus approached critically since fact-checking practice constantly involves negotiation: Fact-checking relies on collaborative context construction rather than on journalists' individual reasoning. Fact-checking is collective knowledge acquisition and evaluation, where individuals rely on other epistemic agents (Godler et al. 2020). Verification of facts is thus not reliant on individuals' capabilities in reaching the truth but is instead dependent on the contribution of others. The epistemic authority is reflected in how journalists can persuade politicians and the public on the correctness of their statements. The results of this study indicate that journalists sometimes fail to get this recognition: Politicians aim at sustaining their reputation as credible public actors. Therefore, they approach fact-checking journalists critically. Once the fact-checks are published, people tend to utilize them for their political purposes on social media. Hence, fact-checking will not necessarily achieve its corrective function which it declares as its purpose. Journalists appear to be critical of their own role as fact-checkers since they hesitate to make normative statements about right and wrong facts. For journalists, journalistic authority is to be distinct from political authority, and they defend their neutral role with the journalistic methods and values that guide their practice.

Fact-checking journalists have to consider the context in which politicians' knowledge claims are articulated. In addition, journalists operate according to journalistic values of fairness, balance, and public service. These values affect fact-checking, including the process of selection to the evaluation of the practice. Journalists' work on fact-checking is thus influenced by established ideas, which characterize the institution of journalism and which guide their actions. In other words, fact-checking journalists are affected by not only the institution's internal procedures and values but also by external institutional structures in which they act. The latter refers to other institutions, which serve journalists for their information purposes. Journalists thus operate within a certain institutional structure, whose functions are based on a set of constitutive rules (Graves 2016, 71). The validity of journalists' arguments is often derived from sources that are collectively acknowledged as legitimate. Journalistic fact-making therefore is grounded on the shared notions of authority in the society. These facts are not universal nor mere opinions but exist in a specific institutional context. Journalists mediate facts that enable individuals to act in their everyday lives. However, these facts often obtain their legitimacy from established institutions. Fact-checking may actually shake this institutional structure: What looks like a verifiable knowledge claim by the source may turn out to be unsettled

policy upon close inspection (Graves 2016, 69). In their everyday lives, people may act with imperfect facts, having no need to factually verify every definition of events and objects. Fact-checking is about breaking up the categories and objects that are taken for granted, indicating that every fact is an argument that can be disputed and refuted (Graves 2016, 72).

Knowledge production in the journalistic community operates under a different set of rules than other institutionalized communities, such as the scientific community. Whereas journalists operate in the public domain, scientific communities operate within a narrow epistemic community, which share an interpretative system (Graves 2016, 75). Scientific groups form epistemic communities operating, for example, in the field of law, medicine, or a particular policy area. As Kuhn (1964) indicated, scientific communities also function within a specific sociolinguistic context that shapes scientific results. In the scientific community, facts can be established or delegitimized against this interpretative system. The journalistic community, however, lacks such a system. Rather, it operates in a discursive environment of unstable facts, plural and sometimes uncivil discourse, and uncertain meaning (Graves 2016, 78). Firstly, Graves argues that the fundamental problem in journalism and genres such as political fact-checking is the language of truth: The belief that some body of universal truths exists that are protected from delegitimization with arguments or interpretations (Graves 2016, 54). As the social epistemologist Goldman (1999) indicated, truth is rather a useful concept to differentiate valid arguments from invalid ones.

Secondly, the presumption of fact-checking tends to be that the public sphere is polluted with uncivil discourse, creating a problem which journalists are eager to fix. When scientific communities share a notion of a civility norm, which designates who can speak and how to speak in the scientific domain, public discourse is restrained in the arena. Scientific communities rely on mutual trust and assumption of good faith in the process of collective knowledge production (Graves 2016, 74.). Journalism, however, operates in the political world, where such norms to constrain the members of the public are more ambiguous. As the results concerning external factors indicate, journalists lack authority to make others obey their rules; furthermore, they fall short in having social and institutional mechanisms to regulate public discourse (Graves 2016, 74).

Thirdly, as the findings of this study indicate, journalists were hesitant to fact-check claims due to epistemic problems related to interpersonal factors. Journalists have to cope with uncertain meaning, constantly interpreting politicians' speeches, which often involved humorous remarks, exaggerations, and words with nuanced meaning. Political discourse thus lacks Habermasian rational-critical discourse falling short of the ideal for public talk, since political actors adhere to instrumental advantages rather than pursuing coherent reasoning discourse (Graves 2016, 78). As Graves argues, fact-checking journalists not only focus on right information but on right communication.

Hence, fact-checking contains a normative notion of the desired public discourse. As this study suggests, journalists believe that the presence of fact-checking journalists at the election debates made politicians more aware of what to say in the public: an effect which they considered as beneficial. This would indicate that the genre aims at restraining discourse into a civilized and rational form in the public sphere. Political fact-checking as a practice could therefore function as a mechanism to regulate public discourse. The implications this would have on political discourse and on the desirableness of results are questions that remain unanswered.

Fact-checking strives towards securing public facts that are shared by a community of people. It reflects the fact that journalism has lost its gatekeeper status in selecting and informing the public about subjects and events in flux, establishing a situational picture for the public to accept. Fact-checking, however, is a somewhat paradoxical practice: On the one hand, without common facts to ground political discussion, the political sphere will cease to create unity within people. Politicians are unable to agree on anything if they fail to accept public facts, which determine their decision making. Meaningful politics disappear if people are not committed to accepting common facts about issues and events. Fact-checking journalists intervene in this process by distinguishing true claims from wrong ones. However, they are unwilling to be associated with political authorities. On the other hand, journalistic fact-checking may be approached as a normative project where journalists, even well-intentioned, seek to fix the quality of discourse in the public sphere; however, in this process they advocate for the kind of rational discourse that excludes actors who fail to take part or accept such aspirations. This may serve anti-elitist arguments of journalists being allied with societal elites.

5.1 Trustworthiness of the study

Let us now consider the trustworthiness of this study. The qualitative study is a flexible process that relies on the researcher's decisions and choice of methods, which creates a demand for transparency in the reporting process (Lincoln & Cuba 1985). It is important to offer readers a comprehensible account of the solutions made during the process. This will shed light on the limitations regarding the research and provide tools for the reader to evaluate the process.

According to Tynjälä (1991), the qualitative research tradition holds different interpretations on how to evaluate the reliability of research. Competing views exists on the criteria for evaluation of reliability and validity in qualitative research, which are approached differently in the quantitative tradition (Tynjälä 1991, 389). This study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1985) qualitative evaluation criteria to discuss the limitation of the research. Evaluation is based on four dimensions: credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. In the following sections, each is discussed separately.

Credibility

The credibility of the qualitative research can be evaluated in terms of how researcher's constructions correspond to the original constructions of the phenomenon under research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Different techniques offer ways to build research credibility: Prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation based on Lincoln and Guba have been utilized in this study. First, prolonged engagement refers to time being spent on studying the context and culture under research, enabling researcher to build a background for the study (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Here, prolonged engagement began by reading about political fact-checking extensively and discussing the topic with friends who work in journalism. The time spent on building the theory of political fact-checking, contacting participants, and constructing the interview frame lasted approximately one month. It was followed by interviews with the Finnish journalists who had conducted political fact-checking in the newsrooms. These interviews shed light on difficulties journalists were experiencing during the practice as they aimed at revealing truth about claims. As epistemic problems were being articulated, it became clear that the theoretical framework of the study needed elaboration. After all the interviews, the theoretical

framework was developed with the theory of social epistemology; in addition, the sensemaking approach and the concept of epistemic authority was included. With this collaboration, the ground for the framework could highlight the social aspects of knowledge production in the newsroom.

With persistent observation, Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to time spent on finding the characteristics and elements that are most relevant to the research issue. In other words, persistent observation provides depth to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 304). In this case, the focus on the participants with personal experience with the genre was considered important. Time was spent on searching journalists who had conducted political fact-checking in the latest elections. In addition, attention was paid to selecting participants from different backgrounds if possible. The few journalists that had done political fact-checking managed to participate in the current study. Nonetheless, since fact-checking had been conducted in the last year or two, all the journalists expressed some difficulties in remembering their actions or feelings during sensemaking processes. Journalists had to rely on their memory since they had not written down any notes or thoughts of that period. The results would be more reliable if the study had been conducted at the time of elections when journalists were actually fact-checking.

Moreover, triangulation refers to a technique that aims at ensuring that the research account is rich, comprehensive, and well-developed (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Here, the theoretical framework was developed as multidisciplinary, drawing from organizational research, philosophy, and media and communication studies to describe how journalists make sense of their sources in the context of political fact-checking. The multidisciplinary approach enabled utilization of concepts that have not been used extensively in the field of media and communication, such as the concept of epistemic authority.

Confirmability

Confirmability is evaluated according to the extent that the findings of the study are shaped by the participants and not the bias or interests of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Confirmability was approached by planning the interview frame based on important findings of previous research so that questions would reflect crucial points. The

interview frame was repeated consistently with each participant. When the participant asked to be more specific, the interviewer reformulated the question in the same manner for each participant. Because the interviewer had oriented widely to the research area beforehand, she was able to be consistent with the supplementary questions. After each interview, notes were made to reflect the interview situation. The interviewer told participants about her background in journalism, which made participants discuss their experiences as if they were talking to a colleague. This, however, was not considered an issue, since the interviewer and participants were not familiar with each other.

In the analysis phase, neutrality was strengthened by reading the interview transcripts multiple times and comparing them with each other. Key themes were formed from terms or sentences that appeared frequently in the transcripts. Since the approach of this study was novel in media and communication studies, opportunities to compare the results were minimal. To strengthen the transparency of the analysis phase, the table was added to the data analysis section to highlight the interpretation process. In reporting the results, quotations from participants were displayed frequently to justify the researcher's interpretations.

Dependability

For dependability, the researcher aims to demonstrate the consistency and repeatability of the study findings. Evaluation of dependability thus focuses on the research situation in terms of both the internal qualities of phenomenon and external factors as causes of variation (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The sample consisted of six Finnish journalists, which can be regarded as a small sample size. The genre of political fact-checking is a novel practice in Finland, and only a few professional journalists have conducted political fact-checking in the latest elections. The few journalists that have done political fact-checking managed to participate in the current study, meaning that the participants had personal experience with the genre. Analyzing the sensemaking process in the context of political fact-checking would have been difficult without subjective experience. For this reason, considerable time was spent locating journalists with personal experience with the genre. However, because of the small sample size, results cannot be generalized to journalists' experiences with the genre by and large. The results highlight the views of Finnish journalists who have occasionally practiced political fact-checking. The approximate

fact-checking time of journalists who fact-checked politicians was only a few weeks during the election cycle. Therefore, the experience of epistemic problems occurring during the practice arise from this context. The results could possibly differ if the study was repeated in a context where journalists have more experience with the practice.

In the interviews, participants were active and reflexive, indicating that the interviews produced several learning experiences. The participants appeared to evaluate their sensemaking process from many dimensions. This may have led to the inconsistencies in answers during the interviews. As the interview frame consisted of open questions, leaving considerable space for journalists to reflect on the issue, occasionally journalists changed their view during the interview. For example, the first participant expressed a clear stance in favor of continuing political fact-checking in the news organization; however, she changed her stance over the course of the interview. After reflecting on the practice and its epistemic problems during the interview, she concluded that the genre might be unfit for her news organization. However, when the researcher reformulated the question to test her stance, she returned to her initial stance.

Since the genre of political fact-checking is relatively new in Finland, participants were operating without a general framework of the practice. This could have affected their sensemaking process because they lacked proper instructions for the practice. There could be fewer experiences of epistemic problems if journalists had planned instructions, which they could follow. Thus, the results could have differed in other contexts where journalists are better prepared for the practice.

Transferability

Evaluation of transferability refers to how the results can be transferred to other contexts, which depends on context similarities (Lincoln & Guba 1985). After all, the reader will decide whether these results are applicable to other contexts.

The results reflect the experiences of six participants who are affected by the political culture in which they live, the organizations in which they work, and their experiences in journalism. As stated in the results, participants were critical of how political fact-

checking suited Finnish political culture, where the relationships with sources is grounded in trust that sources speak honestly. Although they saw beneficial aspects in the genre, their analyses were more critical than positive. The results reflect the fact that politicians have started to utilize populist political communication strategies in the international political scene (Van Dalen 2019), and the strategies have also appeared on the national level (Ylä-Anttila 2020). Journalists are only beginning to discover ways to cope with these new strategies that challenge traditional relationships between journalists and politicians (Van Dalen 2019).

In addition, the interviews especially shed light on the shortage of economic resources in the news organizations of which every journalist is told about. The economic situation appeared to have an effect on journalists' attitudes regarding new initiatives and practices since they expressed their concern about whether changes in their work were economically possible. The criticism concerning political fact-checking might stem from this economic reality faced by journalists in their news organizations. If the economic situation would improve in their work places, journalists could be more receptive to new practices. The news organizations could have more time and resources to prepare journalists in learning novel genres at work.

Moreover, the research would benefit from a multimethod approach, where sensemaking is studied in collaborating methods, such as interviewing and ethnography. Interviewing relies on journalists discussing their experiences, leaving out the group aspect of the collective sensemaking process and how the conclusions are actually reached in action. Ethnographic accounts would add an additional layer in terms of reflecting journalists' accounts.

5.2 Results in relation to previous studies

This study focused on the current topic of fact-checking, which has gained great attention in the last 10 years. Especially after the presidential election of Donald Trump and the Brexit referendum in the UK in 2016, fact-checking has been studied globally and different initiatives have proliferated. However, this study differed from others in that it combined the theory of political fact-checking with the literature of social epistemology

to analyze journalists' sensemaking of facts. Previous studies have focused on these topics separately. The research on political fact-checking has mainly focused on three areas: political fact-checking as a profession (e.g., Graves 2012, Graves & Konieczna 2015, Graves 2016, Graves et al. 2016); the effects of fact-checking on the public (e.g., Amazeen, Thorson, Muddiman & Graves, 2015; Fridkin, Kenney, & Wintersieck, 2015; Garrett, Nisbet, & Lynch, 2013; Jamieson & Cappella, 1997); political elites (Nyhan & Reifler, 2015); and public opinion about the genre (Brandtzaeg & Følstad 2017, Shin & Thorson 2017). However, Mena's study is an exception as it focused on professional journalists' perceptions of the practice (Mena 2018). It should be noted that Mena's study was conducted with US-based journalists. There are no studies focusing on journalists' experiences with political fact-checking in the Finnish context. Moreover, Mena's study focused on journalists' perceptions of the practice but left out the epistemic dimension. It rather analyzed journalists' ways of evaluating the purposes and standards of fact-checking (Mena 2018). It departs from this study, which concentrates on the actual sensemaking process occurring in political fact-checking when journalists aim to interpret the truthfulness of their sources' claims.

In addition, the sensemaking approach has not been utilized in media and communication studies in this context. Previous studies have concentrated on journalist-source relations on a more general level (Van Dalen et al. 2011); for example, conceptualizing relations between journalists and politicians that are challenged by populism (Van Dalen 2019). However, since it is argued that journalism has faced an epistemic crisis, meaning that journalism currently operates in the media ecology where knowledge and truth are increasingly understood as construction (Steensen 2019), closer inspection to journalists' explanatory accounts of epistemic challenges was undertaken in the current study.

Moreover, the concept of epistemic authority requires further elaboration in the field of media and communication. As this study only focused on individual journalists' sensemaking, drawing adequate conclusions about journalists' epistemic authority remains difficult. This study approached journalists' epistemic authority only from journalists' subjective perspective to draw implications on how journalists see themselves as epistemic authorities. Theorizing the formulation of epistemic authority would require a more comprehensive research design and intersubjective situation with participants.

5.3 Implications to future studies

This study drew from research areas such as organizational studies, philosophy, and media and communication. Sensemaking theory has been advanced in organizational studies, and lately it has been used in the context of collective sensemaking processes (e.g., Telenius 2016). It is argued that media and communication researchers adopt this framework for further research to study journalistic knowledge production in groups. For this, the theoretical framework of social epistemology suits preconceptions about knowledge as a social creation. Alvin Goldman's theory of social epistemology is a young philosophical field that can be utilized in studying collective knowledge production. The framework of social epistemology is also advocated by Godler et al. (2020) and Ekström & Westlund (2019) to develop the theory of journalistic knowledge production in the future. This study aimed to make a contribution to this research area. This theoretical framework enables focus on issues, such as how journalists can best pursue the truth with the help of others or how journalists collectively utilize new knowledge forms in their daily work. In a rapidly changing information ecology, journalistic knowledge production is influenced by multiple agents and technologies, which are reflected in their work habits, tastes, and products.

The concept of epistemic authority stems also from the tradition of philosophy, and lately it has been theoretically developed in that research area (Croce 2019, Popowicz 2019). However, few have employed the concept for empirical research. Telenius's (2016) study is an exception in this regard, and her study presents an example of studying collective sensemaking in the newsroom that enables further development of journalists' epistemic authority. Thus, future studies should combine and advance the subjects of the current study.

To be more specific, the question of journalism's epistemic authority is valuable when considering current developments regarding automated fact-checking technologies and algorithms. Since the current media ecology is epistemologically much more complex than before, the institution of journalism, in addition to other institutions, are creating and adopting technologies in order to combat epistemic problems and the challenge regarding disinformation on the internet. Automated fact-checking intiatives combine natural language processing and machine learning to identify and select claims for fact-checking (Graves 2018, 3). Having described epistemic challenges that occur in human interaction

between journalists and their sources, automated fact-checking technologies may skip such sensitivities that evolve in social situations. As Carlson (2018a) argues, the "algorithmic judgement" can draw its legitimacy from non-involvement of human subjectivity and claim its standardized processing as non-biased. This will open a new debate on objectivity in which journalists have to participate. However, automated verification is not yet capable of fact-checking properly to identify the contexts of judgement: Automated fact-checking (AFC) lacks the ability to exercise judgement and collaborate evidence from various sources (Graves 2018, 4). It is problematic since many claims often do not fall into simplified true-or-false verdicts. More research is then needed to engage these epistemic issues regarding automated fact-checking. Before then, journalists will have to come up with ways to operate in epistemologically complex media ecology.

5.4 Practical implications for journalists

The findings of this study shed light on journalists' epistemic challenges with fact-checking, but journalists also found practical solutions to these challenges. Journalists indicated collective sensemaking as an opportunity to improve their performance and strengthen trust in their work performance. Although results indicated that journalists experienced their collective sensemaking as messy sometimes[21], they still argued that the support and presence of their peers was important to address epistemic problems during work.[22] Political fact-checking is still a novel genre in Finland; hence, there was a lack of proper framework to conduct fact-checking in the newsroom. Some journalists wished that editors would contribute more and lay out specific guidelines for fact-checking. Editors could thus focus on being more present to make sure journalists have enough support for their work. Not only did journalists wish for clarifying guidelines, they also saw benefits in having enough time for negotiation to exchange their opinions and, with assistance from the peers, strengthen their arguments in justifying their content.

Journalists also saw benefits in increasing transparency measures, which allow the public to evaluate the facts journalists use to evaluate claims. Transparency was presented as a

[21] This was stated in page 60.
[22] As it was stated in page 53.

way to strengthen journalism's legitimacy since it would ground practices on openness and accessibility. However, transparency does not particularly answer to more fundamental question related to fact-checking practice: journalists' justification of the selected facts on the one hand and their commitment to the dominant ideal of journalistic objectivity on the other. Following Kelkar (2019, 102), journalists can reflect on the facts of particular issues, but their commitment to journalistic objectivity would prevent them from taking a stand on wider political questions, leading to contradictions in their legitimacy. Although professional journalists appear to remain committed to the ideal of a value-free media, as Kelkar argues, competing alternative media ecosystems, political polarization, and curatorial platforms may force journalists to come up with other models of objectivity to create credible media and knowledge-producing institutions.

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APPENDIX

Table 2. Full interview frame: journalists' sensemaking in the context of political fact-checking

Interview frame

A. Sensemaking process

1. What kind of thoughts did you have when you first heard about political fact-checking?
2. Who introduced political fact-checking in the newsroom?
3. How did you conduct political fact-checking?
4. How did you select claims to check?
5. Who did you contact to verify the claim?
6. How easy was it to determine claims' truthfulness?
7. What did you do when you felt difficulty in assessing claims' truthfulness?
8. Would you use the word "lie" in political fact-checking? If not, why?
9. How did you experience political fact-checking?
10. What kind of challenges did you encounter? How did you overcome them?
11. Why is political fact-checking important in your view?
12. How comfortable did you feel with judging claims?

B. Learning process

13. What kind of things did you learn?
14. What kind of support did you have?
15. How would you continue with political fact-checking?
16. What kind of threats do you see in the practice?
17. What kind of possibilities exists?
18. Why has political fact-checking been invented?
19. Who benefits from the practice?
20. What is the future of fact-checking in your view?