

Is the Age of Impartial Journalism Over? The Neutrality Principle and Audience (Dis)trust in Mainstream News

Markus Ojala 

Centre for European Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

ABSTRACT

This exploratory study addresses the relationship between audience trust in the news media and the ideal of neutrality in journalism. It starts from the premise that, at a time when national conservatism is on the rise as a political movement in Western societies, journalism is less and less recognised as a neutral actor in politics. Therefore, efforts to present itself as such may be damaging journalism's credibility and trustworthiness among its publics. The article examines this premise on the basis of a representative survey of Finnish media audiences and three focus group interviews, asking how Finns' expressed trust or distrust of the mainstream news media is connected to their perceptions about journalism's neutrality and impartiality—or lack thereof—in political debate. The findings indicate that while the large majority of Finnish audiences express trust in the mainstream news media, they are divided when it comes to their level of confidence in journalism's neutrality. Moreover, both trust and perceptions of neutrality are strongly associated with audiences' political outlook. We conclude that audience distrust of the media mainly reflects the difficulties that mainstream journalism faces in giving an equal voice to all political groups and views at a time of heightened ideological contestation.

KEYWORDS

Journalism; neutrality; impartiality; trust; distrust; audiences

Introduction

Neutrality and impartiality are typically acknowledged as professional standards in various journalism cultures worldwide (Hanitzsch et al. 2011; Boudana 2016). Yet for some years now, scholars have seen a steady shift towards more opinionated and partisan forms of journalism (e.g., Kantola 2013; Esser and Umbricht 2014; Levendusky 2014). In an era of increasingly polarised politics, the rise of populism and the growth of alternative and partisan online news sources (e.g., Van Aelst et al. 2017; Grossmann 2018; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020), journalism appears to be heading towards increasing partisanship, and the ideals of journalism's impartiality and detachment from politics seem to be in a permanent state of decline. Most recently in the US, an increased emphasis on advocacy

CONTACT Markus Ojala  markus.ojala@helsinki.fi

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and partisan journalism during the Trump presidency proved to be a lucrative model for many legacy news organisations (Tett 2019; Ferullo 2020).

At the same time, recent studies indicate that audiences' distrust of the news media is growing particularly in many Western countries and is at least partly driven by audiences' increasing perception of bias and partisanship in journalism (Newman and Fletcher 2017; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Fisher et al. 2020; Gallup and Knight Foundation 2020). This suggests that, from the perspective of audiences, the news media's trustworthiness still rests on its perceived neutrality and impartiality. This begs an important question: Rather than eroding the importance of neutral reporting as a journalistic function, is the newly politicised media environment reinforcing the demand for it (Sambrook 2012)? On the other hand, given that large segments of audiences now doubt that the news media covers politics fairly (Pew Research Center 2018), it may be increasingly difficult to regain their confidence in journalism's impartiality. If that is the case, have the ideals of neutrality and impartiality become a burden for journalism's trustworthiness?

This article addresses these questions through an exploration of the relationship between audience trust in the media and their perceptions of journalistic neutrality in the national context of Finland. With the help of a national survey and focus group interviews, it examines the extent to which Finnish audiences—both those who find professional journalism trustworthy and those who express distrust of the mainstream media—see journalism as a neutral observer of events, and how they assess the role of the news media in political debate. The study corroborates earlier findings that the media's perceived political biases are a major factor contributing to audience distrust of journalism, whereas neutrality and impartiality are widely expected from journalists and serve as the basis for their perceived trustworthiness (e.g., Ward 2005; Newman and Fletcher 2017; Flew et al. 2020). However, drawing on critical scholarship that approaches journalistic neutrality and impartiality as practices that have political and ideological outcomes (e.g., Hall et al. 1978; Hackett 1984; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2017), this study also seeks to point to the limits of these ideals. More specifically, the study argues that assuming an impartial position is contingent on the existence of an implicit agreement between journalists and their audiences regarding the boundaries of legitimate political disagreements. The critical tradition thus helps us understand why sticking to impartiality has become highly complicated for journalism at a time when national conservative parties and movements increasingly challenge the mainstream "liberal" consensus.

Journalistic Neutrality and Audience Trust in the Media

While neutrality and impartiality are widely shared journalistic values across the globe (Hanitzsch et al. 2011), there are no universally agreed definitions for these terms. Here, I draw especially from Heikkilä (2008), who ascribes two historical backgrounds and alternative uses to the notion of neutrality in journalism. The first derives from the natural sciences and connotes the idea of *non-interference*, meaning that journalists should not in any way influence the events they report on. In this sense, neutrality can be understood as a detached observer position where news journalism transmits only the facts and lets audiences make up their own minds about them. The second meaning of neutrality, deriving from the context of politics and international relations,

alludes to nonalignment and prescribes an *impartial* position for journalists within political disputes. Impartiality thus forms one of the two constitutive elements of journalistic neutrality, pointing to a type of journalism that avoids favouring any particular social or institutional interests. Understood in these terms, neutrality has evident affinities with the notion of objectivity. Indeed, many definitions of objectivity in the literature list neutrality, detachment and impartiality among its constitutive components, alongside factuality or truthfulness (for a brief overview, see Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepsel 2013, 89). Others, however, use the notion of objectivity in a more restricted sense to refer to professional practices aimed at minimising the impact of subjective judgment when verifying facts (e.g., Sambrook 2012; McNair 2017). We can thus interpret neutrality either as part of the broader ideal of objectivity or as a separate notion.

Of the two dimensions of neutrality, the idea of non-interference has often been dismissed as rooted in some bygone era of naïve positivism and, as such, an anachronistic principle (e.g., Muñoz-Torres 2012). Nonetheless, even as its epistemological foundations are suspect, the idea of detached observation still appears to enjoy considerable support among journalists, at least in the United States (Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepsel 2013). In any case, impartiality, the other dimension of neutrality, has been the subject of greater scholarly interest of late. Boudana (2016, 602–603), for instance, divides impartiality into “non-partisanship”, or the avoidance of “expressing judgment for or against one side in a political dispute”, and “balance”, or giving “an equal voice to those competing for the interpretation of the events”. She argues that the latter conception of impartiality has largely displaced the former as a journalistic standard. Similarly, Bélair-Gagnon (2013) traces the historical evolution of impartiality within the BBC, pointing out that the ways in which the practices and understandings of the concept evolve over time may be shaped by changing political contexts as well as by media-technological changes and the new problems they pose for journalists.

In addition to change over time, journalistic cultures influence how neutrality is interpreted and emphasised. In the UK, where the press has long been politically partisan, it has mostly been the broadcast news that has claimed to strive for neutrality (Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017). In the United States, the principle of neutrality has traditionally been more widely shared across both print and broadcasting media (Hopmann, Van Aelst, and Legnante 2012; Hackett 2015), even though partisan forms of journalism have gained ground particularly on talk radio, cable networks and online news sites (Prior 2013; Grossmann 2018). Western and northern European democratic-corporatist media systems provide yet another context. Even though the press has a history of strong political alignment in these countries, journalists nowadays tend to distance themselves from political partisanship and advocacy (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Brüggemann et al. 2014). But while emphasising political impartiality, these journalistic cultures usually also value maintaining an active analytical and participatory role in the public debate (Reunanen and Koljonen 2018; Henkel, Thurman, and Deffner 2019).

Journalistic neutrality tends to be highly regarded by audiences. Tsftati et al. (2006) found that in Israel, audiences valued neutrality more often than even journalists themselves. Similarly, in studies of audience trust in the media, neutrality is sometimes identified as one factor in strengthening the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of a given news outlet and the news media in general (Ward 2005; Flew et al. 2020). Conversely, perceived bias is generally understood to weaken audience trust in news providers

(Lee 2010; Fisher et al. 2020; Tully, Vraga, and Smithson 2020). In their study of audience comments on media trustworthiness in nine countries, Newman and Fletcher (2017) found that media bias was the most often voiced reason for discontent among those who expressed distrust of the news.

To be sure, scepticism about journalism's inherent biases constitutes an ever-present challenge for a profession that makes a claim to neutrality and impartiality. Accordingly, media bias has been a longstanding point of public and academic debate particularly in the US context (e.g., Entman 2007; Prior 2013). There, the issue has been raised particularly by socially and politically conservative groups, accusing the media of a liberal bias that systematically disfavours conservative actors and views (Domke et al. 1999; Major 2015). With the growth in strongly partisan cable networks and online media amplifying political attacks against the "liberal media" over the past decade or so, this scepticism has been reflected in the decline of trust in the mainstream media among conservative audiences (Koliska, Chadha, and Burns 2020). Notably, similar accusations have become increasingly familiar in many other Western countries with the rise of new national conservative parties and movements (e.g., Aalberg et al. 2018; Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). As a result, questioning the trustworthiness of the media and its impartiality has become central to a type of national conservative politics that positions itself outside of the mainstream "liberal" consensus (Koliska and Assmann 2019; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020).

In sum, the widespread perceptions of journalistic bias as well as increasing distrust of the media seem to be intimately connected to the broader political and ideological contestation taking place in Western societies. There is thus a need to more closely examine the links between audiences' trust in the mainstream media and their beliefs about the role of journalism in public debate. To what extent is trust in the media based on perceptions of journalistic neutrality in the two senses of the term? Are the widening ideological rifts between liberal and national conservative views of society paving the way for two divergent experiences and conceptions of the media and journalism among audiences? In addition to addressing these questions, this article contributes to the debate by critically assessing the possibilities and limits of neutrality as a journalistic ideal and practice. Even if audiences might still value detachment and impartiality in reporting, do they still have faith in neutral and impartial journalism?

The Case of Finland

Finland presents a peculiar context for studying the relationship between journalism's neutrality principle and audience trust in the news media. In international surveys, Finland often ranks among countries with the largest shares of the population expressing trust in the news media (Newman et al. 2020), or conversely, the lowest levels of distrust of traditional media (Eurobarometer 2019a). National studies largely affirm that most Finns express strong or moderate trust in the news media, while only a small minority seem to actively distrust professional journalism (e.g., Tiedebarometri 2019; Matikainen et al. 2020). The broadly shared trust in the media is associated with Finns' high level of trust in social institutions in general (e.g., Tiedebarometri 2019; Eurobarometer 2019b). It has often been argued that the media system has been an integral component of the Finnish post-war welfare state project and that the mutually affirmative relationship

between the media and the state has guaranteed high public legitimacy for both (e.g., Nieminen 2019).

Finland is generally identified as a northern European democratic-corporatist media system, characterised by a high level of journalistic professionalism, a strong public service media and an independent press (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Herkman 2009). Since the demise of the party press in the 1980s, the Finnish media system has been characterised by little external pluralism, meaning that major news organisations are not politically aligned and purport to represent all political parties and views in a balanced manner. Given these systemic features, it comes as no surprise that objectivity, detachment and non-partisanship are highly regarded principles among Finnish journalists (Ahva et al. 2017; Reunanen and Koljonen 2018). Moreover, the journalistic culture is highly consensual. The mainstream media outlets do not politically or ideologically position themselves against one another, and criticism of other media outlets or individual journalists is rare.

Reflecting the popular unanimity behind the welfare state project, the political system experienced little volatility in the post-war period. Since the turn of the 2010s, however, the political landscape has significantly changed as the Finns Party, an emergent right-wing party, has gained a strong foothold in Finnish electoral politics with its criticism of established parties and an agenda that blends cultural conservatism, nationalistic opposition to the European Union, anti-immigrant attitudes and resistance to policies addressing climate change (Kivistö and Saukkonen 2019). The rise of the Finns Party has also had an impact on the relationship between politics and the media. Finnish politicians have traditionally refrained from fomenting public distrust of the media, and accusations of a liberal (or left-wing) bias or of an elite bias were not prevalent before the end of 2000s. However, the articulation of conflicts with the mainstream media has since been a conspicuous element in the rise of the Finns Party and national conservative citizen activism (Herkman 2017; Kivistö and Saukkonen 2019).

The environment of political journalism has thus become increasingly conflictual in Finland. As Newman and Fletcher (2017) point out, democratic-corporatist systems typically feature low levels of media polarisation since media organisations mostly lean towards the political centre. While it may foster a consensual political culture, the absence of openly partisan media ventures creates a challenge for the media system with respect to representing the entire range of political views. With the rise of national conservative opposition to traditional political parties, this challenge has become increasingly urgent, as it has given rise to accusations that the media is stacked against the newcomers and seeks to protect established parties and liberal views. The following analysis assesses how these tensions may have affected audiences' trust in the media and their faith in journalism as an impartial mediator in politics and public debate.

Data and Method

The study builds on an online survey and three focus group interviews concerning audience perceptions of the news media and journalism in Finland, particularly in terms of their societal influence, responsibility and trustworthiness. The survey was conducted in May 2019 by a market research company, Taloustutkimus, among members of an internet panel recruited using random sampling methods ($N=1053$). The sample was

representative of Finnish internet users and the findings can be generalised to the entire population, given that the internet penetration rate was 90 per cent among 16-to-89 year olds in 2019 (Statistics Finland 2019). The margin of error on individual survey questions ranged between 0.9 and 3.2 percentage points ($p < 0.05$). The focus groups involved 23 participants in total and represented three different age groups. One was arranged for young adults between 18 and 25 years of age (four women, three men), another for people between 45 and 64 (four women, four men) and a third for people aged 65 or older (four women, four men). The focus group participants were recruited from southern Finland by Taloustutkimus, but the interviews were conducted by the researchers.

The aim of the analysis was to investigate how audiences differ in their perceptions of journalism's neutrality and impartiality as well as how such perceptions are associated with their trust in the news media in general. For these purposes, we divided the survey respondents into two groups: those who expressed trust in mainstream news journalism and those who expressed distrust. The groups were formed based on a survey question that asked respondents to rate individual national news organisations on a five-point scale from "highly untrustworthy" (1) to "highly trustworthy" (5). A factor analysis of the responses revealed a strong correlation between the three foremost national news brands—YLE News, MTV News and *Helsingin Sanomat* (*HS*)—which were therefore aggregated into a single variable to represent mainstream quality journalism. YLE, the public service media, and MTV, the primary commercial television network, are by far Finland's most regularly accessed individual offline news providers (Reunanen 2020), and *HS*, as the "newspaper of record", is the only nationwide morning paper. The three news brands are also among the five most frequently accessed online news sites in Finland, ranking only slightly behind the sites of two popular tabloid newspapers (Statistics Finland 2019). None of the three news brands is politically aligned, and in previous surveys they have ranked among the most trusted news providers nationally (e.g., Newman et al. 2020, 68). Accordingly, we concluded that the way respondents rated the trustworthiness of these outlets could be considered an indication of their broader attitude regarding the kind of professional news journalism that generally presents itself as being responsible, neutral and objective.

Based on the aggregate variable, over three quarters of the survey respondents (78.6 per cent) noted that they regard mainstream news journalism as either "highly" or "somewhat" trustworthy, while less than one in ten (6.9 per cent) reportedly perceive it as either "highly" or "somewhat" untrustworthy. In the following analysis, the two groups—those who expressed trust and those who expressed distrust—are first observed in terms of their background characteristics, focusing particularly on the differences in their political party preferences. Subsequently, we compare how the two groups responded to a selection of survey questions concerning the neutrality of the news media and journalism. We specifically analyse the results by adopting Heikkilä's (2008) distinction between the two aspects of neutrality as either non-interference (detachment) or as non-alignment (impartiality).

The three focus group interviews supported our initial assumption that audiences make sense of journalism's neutrality in complex ways. Again, the distinction between the two dimensions of neutrality as detachment and as impartiality proved useful in making sense of these complexities. For the analysis, the interviews were transcribed and then thematically coded according to the two aspects of neutrality. It should be

noted that the focus groups were consulted to gain insights into audiences' ways of talking about journalism, but as such, they should not be considered in any way representative of Finnish audiences generally. Moreover, as opposed to the survey respondents, we did not classify individual focus group participants into "trustees" and "distrusters" of mainstream news journalism—even though their interventions often indicated rather consistent attitudes towards the profession. The purpose of presenting the observations made by the focus groups in the following analysis is thus only to add analytical depth to our interpretation of the survey results.

Trustees and Distrusters

Finland's changed political landscape (see the discussion above) and its significance to people's relationship with the news media become apparent once we compare the group characteristics of those who signalled trust in the mainstream news media ("the trustees") and those who expressed distrust ("the distrusters"). Notably, when examining their self-declared sociodemographic details, we mostly found only minor differences between the groups. Younger adults—those under 35—were somewhat more pronounced among the distrusters than the trustees, as were people with a vocational education and those living in small towns and municipalities. Those without a job—the unemployed and pensioners—formed a larger share of the distrusters, whereas entrepreneurs, managers and professionals were more dominant among the trustees. However, while these differences proved to be statistically significant, both groups comprised respondents from highly heterogeneous backgrounds. It would therefore be overly simplistic to characterise the trustees as highly educated, urban and well-off, while labelling the distrusters as blue-collar, marginalised and less educated.

If the differences were small in terms of sociodemographic backgrounds, the story was entirely different with respect to political affiliations. Among the distrusters, one in two proved to be self-declared Finns Party voters, while those voting for all other parliamentary parties comprised only 28 per cent of this group (see Table 1). Conversely, Finns Party voters were a small minority (six per cent) among the trustees, whereas those voting for the other parliamentary parties made up 75 per cent of this group. Moreover, when looking at the other parliamentary parties, it was notable that the left-green and right-wing parties had roughly equal shares among both the trustees and distrusters. The

Table 1. The share of voters from different parties among those who either expressed trust or distrust in the mainstream news media (percentages).

Party choice in 2019*	Trustees	Distrusters
Left and green parties**	41	13
Right-wing parties***	34	12
Finns Party	6	51
Non-parliamentary parties	4	5
Did not vote	6	6
Don't want to disclose	9	13
Total	100	100

* Party preference was inquired by asking respondents to name the party they voted for in the May 2019 parliamentary election.

** Includes the Social Democratic Party, the Green League and the Left Alliance.

*** Includes the Coalition Party, the Centre Party, the Christian Democrats and the Swedish People's Party.

difference in political party preferences between the two groups was thus restricted to the highly unequal presence of Finns Party voters.

The striking disparity between the two groups' political preferences indicates that audience trust in mainstream journalism in Finland is strongly associated with political identification. At the same time, it also points to an ideological rift among audiences. As the Finns Party has been successful in recent years in capturing the national conservative vote, their strong position among the distrusters may indicate that distrust of the mainstream media is grounded in audiences' conservative values and "populist" anti-elite attitudes—a finding familiar from other countries (e.g., Lee 2010; Hanitzsch, Van Dalen, and Steindl 2018; Fawzi 2019; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020). Indeed, the fact that trusters include both left-green and right-wing voters in roughly equal measures suggests that the Finnish mainstream media enjoys widespread support across the traditional left-right spectrum. On the flipside, national conservatives with anti-establishment leanings seem to increasingly find the mainstream news journalism untrustworthy.

Trusters and Distrusters on the Neutrality of Journalism

In terms of their expressed confidence in the neutrality of Finnish journalism, the two groups manifested clear differences. Not unexpectedly, trusters consistently expressed greater satisfaction than distrusters with journalism's performance. However, certain beliefs about journalistic neutrality—or the lack thereof—seemed to be relatively widely shared between the two groups, while other beliefs strongly divided them. Similar observations could be drawn from the focus group interviews, which provided further analytical insights into audiences' sensemaking about journalistic neutrality. In the following subsections, we begin with an understanding of neutrality as detachment and non-interference and contrast it with audience perceptions about journalism's political influence. Subsequently, we turn to the second dimension of neutrality and focus on audience perceptions of journalistic impartiality and representativeness.

Table 2. Perceptions of journalistic detachment and autonomy among trusters and distrusters.

Statement, principle or societal task	Trusters' average	Distrusters' average	Difference****
The media has great influence on common people's political opinions*	4.17	4.63	+0.46
The media has great influence on important political decisions*	3.67	4.30	+0.63
Journalists often colour the news according to their own opinions*	3.75	4.95	+1.20
Journalistic decisions may under no circumstances be ceded to actors outside the newsroom**	3.84	2.10	-1.74
Disseminating information independently of those in power***	7.66	5.06	-2.60

* Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Responses rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Totally disagree" to (5) "Totally agree" ("Don't know" responses were omitted).

** Q: Most Finnish mass media outlets have agreed to commit themselves to the ethical principles enshrined in the Guidelines for Journalists. How well do you think these principles are adhered to in the Finnish media today? Responses on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Totally disagree" to (5) "Totally agree" ("Don't know" responses were omitted).

*** Q: At different times in Western societies, the media has been seen to have various responsibilities. How well does the Finnish media perform the following tasks today? Responses rated on a "school grade" system ranging from (4) failed to 10 (excellent) ("Don't know" responses were omitted).

**** All differences are statistically significant (p value: 0.000).

Neutrality as Journalistic Detachment and Non-Interference

Table 2 breaks down how the two groups, on average, responded to statements regarding the media's societal influence and level of journalistic detachment as well how respondents evaluated journalism on two issues related to its institutional autonomy. The third column indicates the extent to which the two groups differed from one another on each statement. To begin, we found that expressed belief in the societal power of the media was more prevalent among distrusters than among trusters. Nevertheless, both groups tended to see the media as impactful, particularly when it comes to its influence on the audiences themselves. The trusters' average score (4.17) for the statement "*The media has great influence on common people's political opinions*" indicates that the majority of them at least partly agreed with it. The distrusters' score (4.63) indicates an even stronger agreement with the statement. When it comes to the media's political impact, both groups expressed less confidence but still clearly leaned towards seeing the media as influential rather than non-consequential in major political decisions.

Whether or not audiences perceive the media as influential is significant from the perspective of journalistic neutrality. In this respect, the respondents' widespread perception that the media influences both the views of audiences and political processes sits uneasily with the idea of journalistic non-interference and detachment. As a further indication many Finns have little faith in journalists' ability to maintain a detached position, both groups tended to express the belief that journalists actively shape the news. The distrusters' average score (4.95) signals virtually complete agreement with the claim that "*Journalists often colour the news according to their own opinions*". While the average score for trusters (3.75) is considerably lower, it still indicates that most of them tended to agree that reporters often fail to remain detached observers of events. It therefore appears that, irrespective of their overall trust in the mainstream media, Finnish audiences hardly see journalists as neutral messengers who in no way intervene in political events and public debate.

If recognition of the fact that the media and journalists are involved and influential in public debate largely united the trusters and distrusters, the groups were more divided when it came to perceptions about the institutional autonomy of journalism. As Table 2 indicates, distrusters expressed little confidence in the idea that journalistic decisions remain in the newsrooms and are not ceded to outside actors. They also expressed scepticism regarding journalism's ability to disseminate information independently of those in power. On both issues the trusters, in contrast, demonstrated a relatively strong faith in the idea that journalists are not overly swayed by outside pressures.

These observations indicate that the two groups view the position from which journalism influences the public debate quite differently, giving us further clues about how they make sense of the purported neutrality of journalism. Insofar as distrusters believe that journalism remains too close to those in positions of power and has become an instrument of special interests in shaping politics and public opinion, it is difficult for them to regard journalists as detached actors who stand above political conflicts. In contrast, those who tend to trust the media maintain confidence in the media's autonomy and journalists' independence from specific political pursuits. This potentially allows trusters to define a much more neutral position for journalism, one where it exercises its public role relatively free from organised political interests.

The focus group discussions gave us further indications that the widespread perception of journalists' influence and interventional role in public debate can coexist with a sense of journalism's autonomy and detachment with respect to politics. When the issue of the media's influence was brought up, discussions typically revolved around the capacity of media outlets to shape audiences' opinions and general societal outlooks. Many participants appeared to be sensitive to the idea of being personally influenced by journalists and news organisations, referring to, for instance, clickbait headlines or stories intended to arouse emotional responses. Moreover, the focus groups seemed to be in broad agreement that journalists' personal opinions and values affect their news reporting and that, in this sense, reporting is bound to be (somewhat) subjective. Yet, the perception that journalists are influential and interventional actors often seemed to co-exist with a belief in their professional autonomy in the responses of our focus group participants.

The most enlightening observation in this regard came from the group of young adults, where doubts concerning journalistic objectivity were balanced by the conviction that Finnish media organisations maintain a detached position from politics. To make this case, the participants drew comparisons with political journalism in other countries:

I trust the Finnish media pretty much. When you go abroad, or in the United States at least, politics is so much involved in the news that it is more difficult to search for "the truth" there. (Man 2, 18–25)

The [Finnish] media are free from political connections. [...] The media are sort of independent [...] If you look at the British, French—and in the United States, too—you have right-wing papers and left-wing papers, and it's pretty transparent. (Woman 4, 18–25)

In Finland, we have party papers separately. But there [in other countries], all the media are a bit like party papers. (Man 4, 18–25)

The United States is a good example, because there the media are highly politicised, and you have these huge multi-billion dollar corporations running them. Whereas in Finland, it is not like that. And they [the Finnish media] seem not to have too frequently any systematic political view that they attempt to promote. (Man 3, 18–25)

These quotes illustrate how the group of young adults echoed prevailing norms and assumptions about the Finnish democratic-corporatist media system, which prescribes a relatively detached role for journalism with regard to (party) politics. That belief allowed them to reconcile their perceptions of the media being influential and interventionist with a view of Finnish journalism being worthy of trust and operating independently of political interests. To support this conviction—and to express faith in Finnish exceptionalism—the young adults resorted to the domestic/foreign dichotomy and alluded to other types of media systems. Some participants, however, did express doubts about journalists' autonomy vis-à-vis political interests, alluding to what they saw as close and mutually beneficial relationships between politicians and political journalists. Overall, though, the focus group discussions gave us several indications that the principles of the democratic-corporatist media system have been, at least to some extent, internalised by audiences and may also guide the way they make sense of political journalism.

Neutrality as Impartiality and Balance

In addition to understanding neutrality as non-interference and detachment, audiences also assessed journalistic neutrality in terms of impartiality, balance and representativeness. Again, the survey findings indicate both broadly shared beliefs about journalism's performance and notable divergences between audiences. Most notably, a clear gap in the respondents' attitudes emerged with regard to the media's capacity to give space to different societal views (see Table 3). While the trusters' score (3.79) indicates that they on average partly agreed that different societal views are given space in the Finnish media, the distrusters' score (1.61) points to a clear disagreement with the statement. The difference in views is particularly striking compared to the two groups' relative proximity regarding the notions that women and men have equal opportunities for their voices to be heard in the Finnish media and that the national news coverage is capital-centred and fails to be truly representative of the country as a whole. In other words, the key disagreement that separated the two groups seemed to concern the media's *political* and *ideological* representativeness. Whereas the trusters largely expressed satisfaction with the diversity of views presented in the media, the distrusters saw a lack of plurality.

This divergence seems particularly revealing in the light of our earlier observations concerning the differences in political party support within the two groups. Audience satisfaction with mainstream journalism's ideological diversity appears to be associated with support for established parties throughout the political spectrum. Conversely, the strong support for the Finns Party among distrusters and their perception of the media as politically and ideologically non-inclusive suggest that they see anti-establishment and conservative views as being poorly represented in journalism. Coupled with the observation that distrusters strongly agreed with the notion that the public has too little influence on what the media reports (Table 3), it is possible to identify among the distrusters a strong anti-elite or "populist" view of the media (see Krämer 2018). Accordingly, distrusters are likely to see journalists as partial actors who tend to favour elite views and fail to channel the people's "true" interests.

In the focus groups, the tension between mainstream and anti-establishment views of the media was not directly addressed, but it often seemed to be bubbling just beneath the surface. For instance, when the group of young adults discussed the mainstream media's coverage of immigration, one participant pointed out that journalistic decisions

Table 3. Perceptions of journalistic impartiality among trusters and distrusters.

Statement	Trusters' average	Distrusters' average	Difference**
Major media outlets regard as important mostly what happens in Helsinki [the capital]*	3.65	4.17	+0.52
Women and men have equal opportunities in Finland to get their voices heard in the media*	3.73	3.18	-0.55
Readers, viewers and listeners have too little influence on what is reported by the Finnish media*	3.24	4.40	+1.16
The Finnish media gives space to different societal views*	3.79	1.61	-2.18

* Q: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Responses rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) "Totally disagree" to (5) "Totally agree" ("Don't know" responses were omitted).

** All differences are statistically significant (p value: 0.000).

to publish positive or negative stories about immigrants represented a form of public influence in the immigration debate. A participant in the group of 45-to-64 year olds, in turn, raised the issue of bias by contrasting the coverage of President Trump in the Finnish media, which he saw as systematically negative, with the coverage of Sauli Niinistö, the President of Finland, which he saw as systematically uncritical:

Let's compare the coverage of two heads of state. Is it really the case that Sauli Niinistö cannot do anything wrong? And is it really the case that Donald Trump has never in his life done anything right? He has made it to the presidency, but has gotten everything wrong, does not understand anything, does not know anything. You would think that Sauli had made some mistakes somewhere, and that Trump had succeeded in something. (Man 4, 45–64)

These instances illustrate not only that Finnish audiences are sensitive to potential media biases in the coverage of politics. They also indicate that questions about journalistic impartiality are typically debated over issues where liberal and national conservative views clash. The resulting tension between audiences over the ideological balance and representativeness of mainstream journalism played out particularly in the group of those 65 years old and older. Two men in the group found common ground in their experience that political discussions in the mainstream media tend to revolve around a narrow range of actors and views and regularly exclude alternative perspectives. Their claims were challenged, however, by two female participants who defended journalists for doing their best to promote a diverse debate. For them, the gatekeeping by national news organisations boiled down to societal responsibility and had to do with excluding extremism and preventing misinformation:

There are many current affairs programmes and debates where you have two, three, four people debating a topic. Quite often, they are all of the same opinion, confirming one another, and even the moderator echoes them. They only present many similar sides of the topic. (Male 4, 65+)

Yes, I agree. Is something occasionally being left unsaid? Or is it sometimes a bit selectively presented? Is the opposite side given enough space? (Male 3, 65+)

I think they specifically try to bring in different viewpoints and perspectives. And the poor journalist tries to somehow create balance so that everyone gets their voices heard. (Female 3, 65+)

I have no doubt that journalists could make the stories very controversial. But I think that they try to be—like YLE, for instance—a channel for the entire public. They aim to be moderate, so that the very extreme position is omitted. (Female 4, 65+)

If the purpose in the end is to promote the truth, and different sides of the truth, then to what extent can falsities and non-facts suddenly gain huge amounts of influence just so that we would have more diversity? [...] I don't like diversity at the point when it produces misinformation. (Female 3, 65+)

The group exchange illustrates two contrasting approaches regarding the ideological representativeness of the Finnish media. Some audiences appear to be highly critical of journalism for failing to present all sides of issues fairly, accusing the mainstream media of biases and of selective representation of societal views. Others seem to be satisfied with the diversity of the Finnish public debate, identifying contrasting views

and opinions in journalism. Where the latter group sees omissions and exclusions, they regard them as necessary and well-intentioned efforts to gatekeep the public agenda from voices and views that might harm the public good, including prejudiced and inaccurate claims. According to that logic, the issue of representativeness turns into questions about safeguarding democracy and about truth versus misinformation.

Discussion

Traditionally, the legitimacy of the Finnish media system, along with other democratic-corporatist media systems, has been based on its ability to represent the ideological plurality of society (Nieminen 2019). Its success has meant that people across the left–right spectrum have been able to regard the media as a relatively neutral actor in politics and society. However, the maturation of the Finns Party as an established political force over the past decade has signalled the emergence of national conservatives as an ideologically motivated group, many of whom reject the notion of the mainstream media being a neutral player and instead regard major news organisations as aligned with dominant and culturally privileged—“liberal”—elites in society. By presenting the news organisations as their political and ideological opponents, national conservative politicians deny journalists the very possibility of a neutral position. In this context, it is becoming increasingly difficult for journalism to claim to be representing the public (as a whole) or giving (equal) voice to all political groups and views.

Such developments are hardly unique to the Finnish context. Both distrust of the mainstream media and perceptions of journalism failing to be representative of different political views are widespread among those who identify with anti-establishment parties and national conservative values (Fawzi 2019; Sehl, Simon, and Schroeder 2020). To the extent that this “national populism” has become a permanent phenomenon in liberal democracies (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), it represents a difficult and potentially growing dilemma for professional journalism. To better understand its implications for journalistic neutrality, it is useful to draw on more critical perspectives in journalism studies.

Not surprisingly, scholars adopting Gramscian and ideology-critical approaches have always been sceptical of journalistic claims to neutrality and impartiality, pointing out the various ways in which journalism intervenes in political conflicts and affects their outcomes (e.g., Hall et al. 1978; Hackett 1984; Raeijmaekers and Maesele 2017; Laws and Chojnicka 2020). In a seminal analysis along these lines, Stuart Hall (1974) argued that the formal requirements and journalistic practices that produced “balanced” and “impartial” reporting in British broadcasting were tied to underlying assumptions about the distribution of political power. Journalism thus contributed to defining the boundaries of legitimate political disagreements, to the exclusion or marginalisation of those actors and views that did not recognise this sphere of consensus (see also Wahl-Jorgensen et al. 2017). Within these boundaries, journalism was able to present political conflicts in a way that granted it a legitimate position as a neutral mediator. However, Hall (1974, 26) claimed that the strategy of impartiality would meet its limits whenever “the rift in the moral-political consensus in the society widens”. In these circumstances, the purportedly neutral media would find it increasingly difficult to “retain their credibility with the public”.

Hall's critical take on the ideological and power implications of broadcasting offers the important insight that the viability and popular credibility of journalism's neutrality principle are inextricably linked to the broader political context in which journalism operates. His argument also appears fitting for analysing the current political context in many liberal democracies, where the relatively consensual dominance of the traditional centre-left and centre-right has imploded and new radical or "populist" actors have emerged on the political scene. Following Hall's critical analysis, we may conclude that when political and ideological power balances are in flux, journalism's position of neutrality becomes difficult to uphold in two ways. First, even though the ideal of impartiality may continue to inform journalistic practices and guide the self-understanding of journalists, growing segments of the public begin to doubt this narrative.

Second, with the opening of new ideological divisions within the liberal order, journalism may increasingly end up adopting partisan positions in public debate. For instance, in their critical analysis of the BBC's remit, Flood et al. (2011) claim that the corporation's mandate to be impartial in its reporting contradicts its simultaneous mandate to defend certain civic values that are consistent with British liberalism. To a certain extent, the same argument can be extended to professional journalism more generally, insofar as journalists both identify with and are expected to promote liberal values. When covering right-wing populists and national conservative views, mainstream journalists tend to perceive and represent them (justifiably or not) as threatening the liberal order. Journalism thus often finds itself relinquishing its impartiality to defend that liberal order, leading to increasingly opinionated and even partisan reporting. Recent studies on journalists' role conceptions have begun to address this development, indicating that journalists often find it difficult to negotiate between their roles as neutral observers and as advocates of progressive causes when reporting on issues such as immigration (Ojala and Pöyhtäri 2018) or sexual harassment (Møller Hartley and Askanius 2020).

Conclusion

This article has explored how journalism's professional ideal and practice of neutrality relates to audience trust in journalism in the highly politicised environments of public debate that characterise contemporary Western societies. In contexts where political debate increasingly revolves around issues that produce divisions along liberal/conservative and liberal/populist axes, we can ask, is neutral journalism losing its viability and credibility? Can the principle and practice underlining the very legitimacy of journalism as an institution have become overly problematic for journalism's trustworthiness?

Our findings indicate that the connection between trust in the media and perceptions of neutrality is multifaceted. On the one hand, if we understand neutrality as journalists' detachment from and non-interference in public debate, then confidence in journalism's neutrality does not seem to be broadly shared—at least not by Finnish audiences. On the contrary, the news media and journalism are widely seen as institutions that are both influential and strongly involved in shaping public opinion. In this sense, trust in the news media does not rely on a belief in the media and journalism as neutral institutions.

On the other hand, the continuing relevance of the neutrality ideal for building audience trust becomes apparent when it is understood in terms of the professional autonomy of journalism and impartial and representative coverage. Indeed, if trust in the

mainstream media is not grounded in a belief that individual journalists remain non-biased when reporting the news, that trust can be partly explained by audiences' conviction that mainstream media organisations are not controlled by specific political interests and manage to represent and balance various partial views. Conversely, distrust of the media seems to be strongly associated with a rejection of the notion that the media operates independently from organised interests or that it gives a fair hearing to diverging societal views.

It should be noted that these findings were drawn from a survey that was not designed from the outset to measure respondents' perceptions of journalistic neutrality or how such perceptions affect their trust in journalism. Instead, these perceptions and connections were inferred afterwards from responses to a survey that covered more diverse topics. Due to the interpretative nature of the method, the study should be approached more as an exploratory analysis than an attempt to establish solid causal mechanisms. Future studies with a more focused research design might be able to more directly address the relationship between trust and perceptions of neutrality. Another limitation of the study is that its take on the nature of trust in the media remained conceptually undeveloped (see, e.g., Flew and McWaters 2020; Horowitz et al. 2021). Upcoming research could deepen our theoretical understanding of the phenomenon, especially in terms of how it relates to the ideals of journalism and normative functions of the media.

Experts often ascribe popular suspicions about "the manipulating media" to people's limited understanding of how journalists actually operate. Increasing the transparency of journalistic practices is thus frequently offered as a way to increase trust in the news media (Newman and Fletcher 2017; Flew et al. 2020; Henke, Leissner, and Möhring 2020). However, this call for more transparency tends to be confined to greater openness about working practices, including the disclosure of sources (see Hellmueller, Vos, and Poepfel 2013). Less attention is given to ideological transparency or to openness about journalists' own biases, which may nevertheless be read between the lines by critical publics. In this regard, Boudana (2016) has suggested that "fairness", defined as the equal application of certain moral values when judging the actions of parties in a conflict or dispute, should replace or redefine impartiality as a journalistic ideal. Fair journalism thus acknowledges its inevitable partiality in the sense of committing itself to certain value positions but demonstrates impartiality in the sense of evaluating all actors indiscriminately from those positions. Given that much contemporary political contestation takes place precisely between those aligned with different moral positions, the practice of fair journalism would hardly quell accusations of media bias. Nonetheless, the concept of fair reporting represents one path towards recognising the impossibility of neutrality while providing an alternative standard of integrity and trustworthiness. Future studies on journalism ethics and trust in the media should dig deeper into the notion of fairness and its potential to strengthen trust among ideologically diverse publics.

In any case, it seems inevitable that with the opening of new ideological divides in Western politics and the public sphere over the past decade, journalism's neutrality and impartiality have once again become objects of controversy. Together with recent transformations in the media environment, which have both greatly diversified the news sources available to publics and facilitated highly partisan forms of journalism, the political divisions are potentially pointing to the permanent decline of journalistic

neutrality as an ideal and practice. Whether this leads to a deepening loss of public trust in the institution partly depends on the responses of those invested in journalism as a profession and in journalism scholarship. This is where the lessons of critical scholarship ought to enter the conversation, helping us acknowledge that in addition to accurate reporting, journalism assumes many other responsibilities within a political community. It not only mediates public debate between adversarial actors, but also participates in determining their relative positions of influence, as well as in the setting of agendas and dominant perspectives. These aspects inevitably render journalism a political institution whose impacts are not neutral with respect to various societal interests. The search for recovering journalism's public legitimacy must begin by coming to terms with this reality.

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ORCID

Markus Ojala  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7784-8179>

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