

Deliberative journalism and citizenship: principles and practices in the Portuguese regional press

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Abstract

What is the perception that journalists have about the citizens' role in democratic life? What is the role of journalists in relation to public sphere and political debate? The main goal of this study is to investigate the relationship between the local press, citizens and civic practices. It takes as starting point a dual theoretical approach, the theory of deliberative democracy and the movement of public journalism, to assess the scope of a conception of "deliberative journalism."

Under the project "Citizens' Agenda: journalism and political participation in the Portuguese media", a questionnaire was delivered to 45 journalists from eight regional newspapers in Portugal. The results show that although the journalists appreciate the principles underlying the public and deliberative journalism movements (which suggests that a deliberative consciousness is emerging), also express an conventional journalism approach.

Keywords

Local press; public journalism; deliberative democracy; civic participation.

Résumé

Quelle est la perception que les journalistes ont du rôle des lecteurs dans la vie démocratique? Quel rôle jouent les journalistes par rapport à l'espace public et le débat politique? L'objectif global de cette étude consiste à enquêter la relation entre la presse locale, les citoyens et les pratiques civiques. Il a comme point de départ une double approche théorique, la théorie de la démocratie délibérative et le mouvement du journalisme publique, afin d'évaluer le champ d'application d'une conception du «journalisme délibérative.»

Dans le projet "Agenda des citoyens: journalisme

et participation politique dans les médias portugais", un questionnaire a été donné à 45 journalistes de huit journaux régionaux au Portugal. Les résultats révèlent qu, bien que les journalistes apprécient les principes qui sous-tendent le mouvement du journalisme public et délibérative (ce qui suggère que la conscience délibérative émerge), ils expriment aussi une orientation journalistique conventionnelle.

Mots-clés

Presse locale, journalisme public; démocratie délibérative, participation civique.

Introduction

The relationship between democracy and mass communication is, from some decades, subject of a large number of discussions, which, both in academia and in professional practices, question the phenomena involving media communication (Barber, 1984; Barnett, 1997; Papacharissi, 2002). Among the various profiles assumed by the media, regarding the promotion of democratic institutions, *journalism*, with all features and functions assigned to it (such as a catalyst for the dissemination of information), occupies an important space – in so far as it provides an informational repertoire that enables the interpretation of facts, the evaluation of arguments and, at last, the promotion of rationally motivated actions (Dzur, 2002).

In the context of the many debates carried out, the last decades have also aimed two very specific proposals in two fields interconnected, drawn from a very precise and limited set of questions: on the one hand, from the debate on democracy, the understanding of what kind of democratic participation of citizens could we expect in a modern democracy, on the other hand the equal reflection on the essence of journalism - which functions must meet, what is the civic nature of his practice (Schudson,

2008). Although these emerging proposals have some heterogeneity within each of the fields (journalism and democracy), we can briefly place the debate from two models that largely have guided academic discussions as well as the practical developments. We refer to public journalism and deliberative democracy.

The presentation and discussion of both models is largely developed, and, although being normative models, in search of conceptual refinement, is also true is that they have been serving as an inspiration both to trends of contemporary journalism as well as to the more current political discourse - all also sufficiently documented (Barnett, 1997; Blumler, J. and Gurevitch, 1995). The purposes of this paper are much more specific and focus on a very particular point: by reference to the normative ideals associated with deliberative democracy, what can we expect from journalists in their relation with citizens? Or, in other words: will the journalists be available for a professional practice committed to the deliberative ideals applied to the exercise of their job?

Specifically, the aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between the local press, citizens and civic practices. As said before, it takes as starting point a dual theoretical approach, the theory of deliberative democracy and the movement of public journalism, to assess the scope of a conception of “deliberative journalism.” For this purpose it starts by distinguishing, briefly, the ideas of “canonical journalism” from “deliberative journalism.” Then, from a set of questionnaires applied to a sample of 45 journalists from 8 Portuguese regional newspapers, it seeks to identify which model of journalism defines, in discursive terms, the idea that journalists have of their own profession. For the purposes of this study, it is crucial to understand the nature of the relationship between journalists and citizens. We will thus have, using information collected in previous questionnaires, an assessment of the importance that citizens have as journalistic sources, from a discursive but also a procedural perspective. It's from here that we can understand the importance that journalists attach to the principles underlying the movement of public and deliberative journalism (ie, the existence or the possible emergence of a deliberative consciousness), and put it in relation to the stance that journalists commonly adopt.

“Canonical journalism” and “Deliberative journalism”: a brief synthesis of two trends

In the recent decades, the field of media has undergone a series of transformations that profoundly altered the scope of journalism, its design, and by correspondence, the nature of their professional practices. In a brief and, therefore, necessarily reductive form, we can distinguish two trends in journalism - accepting, of course, the set of models that can be associated to each of these conceptions.

What is called “canonical journalism” is a form of journalism that can be designed as a professional practice, an activity directed towards the development and dissemination of information, guided by two principles that stand out among other assumptions, underlying the proper journalistic practice: the ideals of *factuality* and *neutrality*. These postulates have guided for centuries the action of generations of social actors who made their profession of journalism.

However, another way of conceiving of journalism sees it as a “social fact”, not in the orthodox pure Durkheimian sense, but as a set of norms and values in constant dialectic with their own society, in which they operate. To this extent, if in the contemporary world, as we know, the pace of social change has widened substantially, also the practice of journalism has undergone the influence of changes at the systemic level, while continues to contribute significantly to the construction social reality. In the 1990's, Merrit wrote precisely that telling the news is not enough, wishing to contribute for enhancing broad political debate, but also questioning the mainstream journalists perspective of the traditional “neutral”, non interventionist, role of the press behind the reality of the politics (Merrit, 1998).

We should now consider a whole environment marked by a modern belief in the emancipatory capacity of individuals, by a growing reflexivity of social actors, the increasing variability of sources and information channels, all factors that result in an increased participation by social actors, and specifically a participation in the construction of the news. One of the prominent forms of this set of changes came in the form of what might be called “deliberative journalism”, which represents a kind of journalistic practice committed with the deliberative theories (Romano, 2010). This kind of journalism is subsequent with the renewal movements of journalism, directly linked to the idea of citizenship and civic participation, following what is known as civic journalism. In essence, it means the safeguard of

the conditions of rational deliberation, through the deepening of practices that allow the identification of the citizens ways of thinking with the issues that concern them (Correia, 2010: 96). This means to enlarge the scope and plurality of participants in public sphere debates. It also supposes to break away from limited routines and privileged sources. And it finally supposes the press openness to civil society when defining news media agenda (Eksterowick and Roberts, 2000).

What is journalism for?

As journalists are privileged agents in the structuring processes of the public sphere, the study of the values, the beliefs and the behaviors of these professionals is especially relevant in this work. Thus, for the purposes of this study, it is important to analyze what conception of journalism have the regional press journalists, and to what extent this view favors journalistic practices that reinforce the citizens' commitment to the community and the democratic deliberation in the public sphere.

To achieve this goal, the journalists in our sample were confronted with the evaluation of a set of seven functions - those that could be considered "the main functions of regional journalism." Taking into account the objectives of this work, we associate each of the functions of the two tendencies present within the universe of journalistic practices, as described above.

distinction between these two trends, done by the journalists submitted to the inquiry, may help to define the profile of journalists as the functions that attributed to regional journalism.

So, the first set of options represents the so-called "conventional or canonical journalism", and groups:

- defend the interests of the region,
- inform the public and clarify citizens,
- ensure social and political pluralism.

In turn, the second group, associated with the "deliberative journalism," considers the following hypotheses:

- allow the enlarged participation in decision making,
- contribute to problems solving,
- stimulate debate within the region,
- foster public or ideological debate.

Looking for a thorough interpretation of this issue, we decided, for operational reasons, to consider "relevant" the items classified between levels 1 and 4, and "irrelevant" the ones located between 5 and 8.

The main functions of regional journalism are (according to the "canonical journalism" indicators)...

We believe that "deliberative journalism," as a professional practice, involves a set of values and norms, revealed in the daily practice, in which the

| Levels of importance | Defend the interests of the region | | | Inform the public and clarify citizens | | | Ensure social and politic pluralism | | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|--|-------|-------|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | *Nº | % | % A | Nº | % | % A | Nº | % | % A |
| 1 | 5 | 14,7% | 14,7% | 24 | 70,6% | 70,6% | 3 | 8,8% | 8,8% |
| 2 | 6 | 17,6% | 32,4% | 3 | 8,8% | 79,4% | 6 | 17,6% | 26,5% |
| 3 | 6 | 17,6% | 50,0% | 1 | 2,9% | 82,4% | 3 | 8,8% | 35,3% |
| 4 | 3 | 8,8% | 58,8% | 1 | 2,9% | 85,3% | 6 | 17,6% | 52,9% |
| 5 | 1 | 2,9% | 61,8% | 1 | 2,9% | 88,2% | 5 | 14,7% | 67,6% |
| 6 | 1 | 2,9% | 64,7% | 1 | 2,9% | 91,2% | 5 | 11,8% | 82,4% |
| 7 | 2 | 5,9% | 70,6% | 1 | 2,9% | 94,1% | 4 | 11,8% | 94,1% |
| 8 | 10 | 29,4% | 100% | 2 | 5,9% | 100% | 2 | 5,9% | 100% |

* Nº - Number of pieces; % - Percentage; % A - Cumulated percentage

Table 1

The trend of "canonical or conventional journalism", as mentioned, is guided by the ideals of factuality and neutrality. The trend associated with the movement called "deliberative journalism", more concerned with the identification of ways of thinking of people around the issues that concern them, implies openness to external agenda initiative by social movements and groups of citizens (Correia, 2010). We believe that the

dialogue between the different social actors and the journalists is as a core value. To this extent, the chances of response that are potentially presented here reveal the existence (or not) of a predisposition for the establishment of this journalistic approach.

However, given the results, we found the existence of weak values in the four aspects associated with the "deliberative journalism." Of the four aspects under

consideration, only one (“to help solve problems”) has a modal value in the category of “relevant”, more precisely the level 3, with 23.5%. We also verified that the remaining hypotheses that could be indicative of

value is the information carried by the citizens, that is, to what extent the voices of citizens are or not considered in the preparation of journalistic pieces. In other words: the extent to which journalists take into

| Level of importance | Allow the enlarged participation in decision making | | | Contribute to problems solving | | | Stimulate debate within the region | | | Foster public or ideological debate | | |
|---------------------|---|-------|-------|--------------------------------|-------|-------|------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | Nº | % | % A | Nº | % | % A | Nº | % | % A | Nº | % | % A |
| 1 | 1 | 2,9% | 2,9% | 3 | 8,8% | 8,8% | 1 | 2,9% | 2,9% | 1 | 2,9% | 2,9% |
| 2 | 6 | 17,6% | 20,6% | 6 | 17,6% | 26,5% | 4 | 11,8% | 14,7% | 0 | 0% | 0% |
| 3 | 4 | 11,8% | 32,4% | 8 | 23,5% | 50% | 5 | 14,7% | 29,4% | 3 | 8,8% | 11,8% |
| 4 | 3 | 8,8% | 41,2% | 4 | 11,8% | 61,8% | 5 | 14,7% | 44,1% | 4 | 11,8% | 23,5% |
| 5 | 2 | 5,9% | 47,1% | 5 | 14,7% | 76,5% | 5 | 14,7% | 58,8% | 5 | 14,7% | 38,2% |
| 6 | 7 | 20,6% | 67,6% | 4 | 11,8% | 88,2% | 5 | 14,7% | 73,5% | 5 | 14,7% | 52,9% |
| 7 | 8 | 23,5% | 91,2% | 1 | 2,9% | 91,2% | 9 | 26,5% | 100% | 4 | 11,8% | 64,7% |
| 8 | 3 | 8,8% | 100% | 3 | 8,8% | 100% | 0 | 0% | - | 12 | 35,3% | 100% |

* Nº - number of pieces; % - Percentage; % A - Cumulated percentage

n=34 (number of regional journalists questioned).

Table 2

values and biases associated with the development of the deliberative journalism, present levels significantly below what would be expected.

It is possible to verify the existence of statistically significant differences between the two trends of journalism in analysis. The trend that groups the “mainstream journalism” hypothesis reaches an average of 65.7%; for its part, the trend of “deliberative journalism” does not exceed the mark of 42.7%.

Do citizens matter?

In line with the framework of this study, namely the theories of deliberative and public journalism, it is important to collect indicators about the civic attitude of journalists, or if they are available to assume a role that has as its primary mission to raise public life, strengthening citizenship and the improvement of public debate. To that extent, as noted before, to revive the public debate information is not enough, it is still necessary challenge the citizen to participate in it, and accept their participation as valid. It was from this premise that we have sought to know how citizens work as a source of information.

Therefore, the study showed that:

91% of journalists surveyed say they receive contacts of common citizens with information about the events.

76% frequently receive contacts (two or more per week) in order to provide information on events.

If it is true that these responses seem to indicate that citizens have an important role in the process of collecting information, it is important to assess how

account the information they receive from citizens? To try to answer this question, journalists were questioned about their opinion regarding the use of citizens as sources cited in the news.

We considered four possible scenarios about the use of citizens’ voices. On one hand, two assumptions that underlie the trends of the deliberative journalism. We refer to the options which consider that the use of citizen as a source quoted in news “gives voice to those who have little chance to express themselves in public” and “adds points of view that may be important,” since they consider both the plurality on the news and the free access, independently of power and interest arrangements.

On the other hand, we presented two hypotheses linked to a vision of traditional journalism, whose core values are the *objectivity* and *credibility*, and consider that citizens use as a source quoted in news “gives fewer guarantees of credibility” and “does not guarantee representation because common citizens speak only in a personal point of view.” Journalists respondents were asked to rank each of these hypotheses according to four levels of importance: (1 and 2 as the most important, 3 and 4 as the least important).

Analyzing the table, we realize that journalists believe that citizens use as a source quoted in news is mostly a way to give voice to those who have few opportunities to express themselves in the public sphere (76.5%), but also adds points of view that may be important (81.3%). Similarly, respondents regard as less important, or not agree, that the use ordinary

| Levels of importance | gives voice to those who have little chance to express themselves in public | | gives fewer guarantees of credibility | | adds points of view that may be important | | does not guarantee representation because common citizens speak only in a personal point of view | |
|----------------------|---|-------|---------------------------------------|-------|---|-------|--|-------|
| | Nº | % | Nº | % | Nº | % | Nº | % |
| 1 | 10 | 29,4% | 4 | 11,8% | 18 | 52,9% | 4 | 11,8% |
| 2 | 16 | 47,1% | 3 | 8,8% | 10 | 29,4% | 7 | 20,6% |
| 3 | 5 | 14,7% | 7 | 20,6% | 2 | 5,9% | 16 | 47,1% |
| 4 | 3 | 8,8% | 20 | 58,8% | 4 | 11,8% | 7 | 20,6% |

n=34 (number of regional journalists questioned)

Table 3. Use citizens as a source quoted in news...

citizens as a source quoted in news gives fewer guarantees of credibility (79.4%), does not guarantee representation because citizens speak only in their own interest (67.7%). Thus, following those answers,

according to their importance. Thus, respondents had to say whether the agenda of the newspapers in which they work is guided “by local elites,” “local citizens” or “the concerns of commercial media companies.”

| Levels of importance | Local elites | | Local citizens | | The concerns of commercial media companies | |
|----------------------|--------------|-------|----------------|-------|--|-------|
| | Nº | % | Nº | % | Nº | % |
| 1 | 6 | 17,6% | 12 | 35,3% | 13 | 38,2% |
| 2 | 9 | 26,5% | 12 | 35,3% | 15 | 44,1% |
| 3 | 19 | 55,9% | 10 | 29,4% | 6 | 17,6% |

n=34 (number of regional journalists questioned)

Table 4. Believes that the agenda of the newspapers is oriented...

we can assume that journalists consider, at least from an discursive perspective, the information conveyed by the citizens as very important.

Given that the contact with the citizens is common, and their use as a source for news is seen as important to ensure the plurality of voices in the news, is not surprising that 97% of respondents replied that the newspaper they work encourages readers through various mechanisms, since providing the journalists' e-mail to other tools available in the of online pages of the newspapers. Similarly, albeit on a smaller number, 74% of journalists said that usually respond to comments from readers.

Who sets the newspapers agenda ?

We know that the source seeks visibility and media attention, aspire to make a public agenda and to impose certain themes as the focus of collective attention. Given the importance that common citizens have from an deliberative perspective, it is important to understand, from the point of view of journalists, what elements and factors shapes the newspapers agenda.

To clarify this question, were placed three hypotheses to the journalists, which should be ranked

From the table we can observe that there is a balanced distribution of responses for different hypotheses, which in itself indicates heterogeneity of perceptions and opinions by journalists surveyed. Therefore, in the level of major importance (level 1), there is a balance between the responses considering that the agenda is driven by commercial concerns of media companies (38.2%) and those that indicate the concerns of local citizens (35, 3%), as a central aspect to set the agenda. In turn, the hypothesis that appears at the level of minor importance (level 3) is the one which points that agenda should be driven by local elites concerns. It should be underlined that the responses in relation to the hypothesis of an agenda driven “by the concern of local citizens” are almost evenly distributed among the three levels of importance. This means that doesn't exist, among respondents, a clear understanding regarding the aspects that define the agenda of the newspapers in which they work.

Another key element that results from the analysis of these data is related with the meaning of the market for the actions of journalists, ie, the economical perspective of the media, and how the nature of their property and the logic of competition influence the

information process, according to the journalists surveyed. Finally, these data confirm the perception of the importance of citizens for journalists, with a pronounced importance in determining the agenda of the newspapers.

Given these results, we can ask to what extent these responses and this discourse are indeed a scenario of what happens in the publications. To this purpose, it is important to assess the perception of journalists on the news content of the regional. The formulation of the questions follows the outline above, with the raise of three hypotheses that should be prioritized by level of importance, by every journalist. Thus, among the options to answer to “the news content of regional newspapers is ...”, respondents were asked to indicate whether it is “balanced on the participation of elites and citizens”, whether it is “too focused on citizens,” or it is “too focused on the elites.”

If it is true that professionals, especially in a regional context, recognize that often receive contacts of common citizens, the findings shows that the majority devalues them. Even from a deliberative perspective, this devaluation may due to the fact that the content of this information is often focused on personal issues and without common interest. However, and as a general way of action, this mode of relationship between journalists and public sources of information can contribute, in our view, to a growing division from citizens to newspapers.

Crossing the data of the questions here presented, we can suggest, in terms of assumptions, that the fact nominated by the journalists that the agenda of the newspapers is significantly driven by the commercial concerns of the corporate media can help to realize why the content is focused on the elites. This means that the need to respond to market demands, with the

| Levels of importance | balanced on the participation of elites and citizens | | too focused on citizens | | too focused on the elites | |
|----------------------|--|-------|-------------------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|
| | Nº | % | Nº | % | Nº | % |
| 1 | 12 | 35,3% | 1 | 2,9% | 18 | 52,9% |
| 2 | 16 | 47,1% | 12 | 35,3% | 6 | 17,6% |
| 3 | 6 | 17,6% | 21 | 61,8% | 10 | 29,4% |

n=34 (number of regional journalists questioned)

Table 5. The content of regional newspapers is...

As seen in the table, journalists have clearly assigned that the news content of regional newspapers is not too focused on citizens (61.8 % of respondents put it at level 3, the minor). Likewise, they also have awareness that news content of regional newspapers is too stayed in the elite (52.9% of respondents put it at level 1, the most important). In turn, the hypothesis of a balance between both perspectives is the most important for 35% of respondents.

Conclusions

We observed that journalists surveyed idealize, at first, the existence of a newspaper agenda oriented in part by citizens, in which a minor role would be given to local elites. However, in the last question here presented, attending to the news content of local newspapers, the answers given by journalists are in line with the main trends reported in most studies on the regional press, which suggest a preferred approach to the elites at expense of the citizens.

publication of a daily or weekly edition of the newspaper, can somehow force the journalists to give priority to official sources, focusing on the elites, which ensure certain regular information. In this context, it seems that with news content focused on the elites there is too little space for civil society mobilization.

The results show that journalists appreciate some of the principles underlying the movement of public and deliberative journalism, especially in relation to the appreciation of citizens and the importance, in terms of normative principles, attributed to common citizens as sources (which suggest that a deliberative consciousness could be emerging). But the results still show a conventional journalistic approach, mainly revealed in the low levels of importance assigned to functions related to deliberative journalism and the value of the practices associated with the canonical journalism. As a consequence, they show a conventional journalistic approach, which means a perception of journalistic content too focused on the elites and in commercial concerns.

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The Times They Are a-Changing, But Slowly: Citizens' Evaluations of Finnish Media and Journalism during the Recent Election Funding Crisis

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Abstract

In recent years, the influence of citizens on the media has increased in the political public sphere. However, research on their opinions about the media's performance in this field remains fairly scarce. To shed light on the issue, this article focuses on citizens' views of the media and journalism in Finland during the so-called election funding crisis in 2008–2011. The target is to find out how people evaluated journalism and journalists, which ways of reporting were considered acceptable or unacceptable, and how these evaluations differ from observations made in past studies. The issue is investigated both quantitatively and qualitatively in three different samples collected during the election funding crisis: two nationally representative surveys, two extensive online message board samples, and diaries written by 23 citizens. The results indicate that citizens' attitude towards the media and journalism in Finland has become more ambiguous than in the past. On one hand, the active and adversarial reporting style used by journalists during the crisis garners more support from citizens who regard it as a sign of increasing openness. On the other hand, journalists are seen to have become too aggressive towards politicians while their reporting is accused of relinquishing journalism's traditional tenets, such as objectivity and fairness.

Keywords

Political journalism, citizens, Finland, election funding crisis.

Zusammenfassung

Die Zeiten ändern sich, wenn auch langsam: die Einschätzungen der Bürger bezüglich der Medien und dem Journalismus während der Finanzierungskrise bei der Parlamentswahl in Finnland

In den letzten Jahren ist der Einfluss der Bürger auf die Medien in der politischen Öffentlichkeit

gewachsen. Forschung in Bezug auf die Meinungen der Bürger über die Leistung der Medien bleibt jedoch durchaus gering. Um dieses Thema aufzuhellen, konzentriert sich dieser Artikel auf die Meinungen der Bürger über die Medien und den Journalismus in Finnland während der sogenannten „Finanzierungskrise bei der Parlamentswahl“ 2008–2011. Das Ziel ist herauszufinden, wie Leute den Journalismus und die Journalisten bewerteten, welche Art von Berichterstattung für akzeptabel beziehungsweise inakzeptabel gehalten wurde und wie sich diese Schätzungen von den Beobachtungen in früheren Studien unterscheiden. Das Thema wird sowohl quantitativ als auch qualitativ erforscht mit Hilfe von drei verschiedenen Stichproben gesammelt während der Krise: zwei national repräsentative Umfragen und zwei umfangreiche Stichproben aus Internetforen sowie Tagebücher, die von 23 Bürgern geführt wurden. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Einstellung der Bürger zu den Medien und zum Journalismus in Finnland mehrdeutiger geworden ist als zuvor. Einerseits schafft sich der aggressive und manchmal umstrittene Stil der Berichterstattung von den Journalisten während der Krise mehr Unterstützung von den Bürgern, die ihn für ein Zeichen für wachsende Offenheit halten. Andererseits ist empfunden, dass die Journalisten zu aggressiv gegen Politiker geworden sind, wobei sie in ihrer Berichterstattung die traditionellen Merkmale des Journalismus, wie Objektivität und Gerechtigkeit, aufgeben.

Schlüsselwörter

Politischer Journalismus, Bürger, Finnland, Finanzierungskrise bei der Parlamentswahl.

Introduction

Following the societal, political, technological and cultural changes of recent decades, academics have been talking about the increase of the power of the individual at the expense of traditional authorities and collectives. This change has been labelled late modernity or postmodernity (Turner, 1990), the second modernity (Beck, 2006), reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994), or liquid modernity (Bauman, 2000), and whatever the name, its features are also apparent in the political public sphere. If in the past the political public sphere was viewed as a fairly hierarchical field of interaction between the political system, the media¹, and citizens (see e.g. McNair, 2003, p. 20), the boundaries seem to have blurred.

Politicians' status at the top of the hierarchy is increasingly questioned by the media which are differentiating themselves from politics in a trend referred to as mediatization (Mazzoleni & Schulz, 1999), professionalization (Deuze, 2005), tabloidization (Sparks & Tulloch, 2000), or even scandalization (Thompson, 2000). As relations between the two have become more adversarial, both politicians and the media have turned to citizens at the grassroots level for support. Politicians try to garner support for their actions by contacting citizens directly – a prime example from recent years being Barack Obama's presidential election campaign of 2008 in the United States (Castells, 2009, pp. 389–398). The media also pay closer attention to citizens' actions, thoughts, needs, and wishes – for example by trying out different kinds of participatory journalism practices (see e.g. Haas, 2007; Domingo et al., 2008). Moreover, should they wish to do so, citizens are able to challenge the views of politicians and the media directly with the help of new communication technologies (for a recent example from the uprising in Egypt, see Hamdy & Gohaa, 2012).

In this situation, the question of agenda assumes a new dimension. In the past, agenda setting research has focused heavily on the interplay between the political agenda and the media's agenda while citizens' opinions have been of lesser importance (see e.g. McCombs, 2004). In the current climate, however, such practice no longer seems fully viable. The views of citizens need to be incorporated into agenda setting research more extensively to enable a better picture of the political public sphere and its possible future developments. In this field, there is still a lot of work to be done, especially with regard to citizens' agendas

for or against the media in different circumstances and cases. First, much of current research available on the subject is too general by nature – usually polls that measure citizens' views on the media as a monolith, not in the required context of politics. Secondly, a shortage of empirical case studies makes comparison difficult both in time and across nations. Both of these aspects would be valuable in assessments of the developments of the political public sphere – especially given the recent changes that are by no means uniform across different political, journalistic and civic cultures.

This article aims to mitigate the problem by presenting a case study of citizens' views on the media in one country – Finland – where many of the above-mentioned changes in the political public sphere began to emerge later than in other Western countries. This owes much to the country's history. Finland's democratic corporatist tradition of consensual decision-making (see Hallin & Mancini, 2004) meant that society was strongly dominated by the concepts of common public interest and political regulation until the late 1970s (Alasuutari, 2011). The stronghold was also reflected in the media which enjoyed a high level of autonomy from the state and were largely shielded from outside influences due to the country's remote location, small market, and distinctive language. Nonetheless, they favoured a consensual, fact-oriented and elite-respecting way of reporting where long verbatim quotations of politicians' speeches were commonplace (Kantola, 2011a, pp. 37–39; J. Väliverronen & Kunelius, 2009). Citizens followed the media closely, but their views were largely overlooked by the media apart from election days, and for average citizens possibilities for voicing their own opinion without journalistic intervention were very limited (J. Väliverronen, 2011, pp. 143–144).

As the ethos of competition began to spread in Finnish society in the 1980s, the media also began to expand its boundaries. Subsequent changes in reporting style started with features of tabloidization (see e.g. Aula, 1991; Moring & Himmelstein, 1993; Kanerva, 1994; Isotalus, 1998) and journalists' attempts to control the framing and dramaturgy of stories (J. Väliverronen & Kunelius, forthcoming). However, journalism's more substantial differentiation from politics has only taken place in the new millennium with more adversarial reporting and efforts to influence the issue agenda. As a result, the number of scandals concerning either politicians on duty or their private lives has increased (for a recent

case example, see Juntunen & E. Väliverronen, 2010) along with politicians' accusations of the media's excessive sensationalism, moralism, and "witch-hunts" (see e.g. Alho, 2004; Saari, 2009). Politicians are not alone in their critique: a noticeable proportion of Finnish political journalists still express their adherence to the traditional and distant way of reporting while voicing their scepticism of the new style (Kantola, 2011b, pp. 119–134).

The new millennium has also seen an increase in citizens' influence in the public sphere, which is largely due to their increasing online presence. According to a recent survey, nearly nine out of ten Finns use the Internet weekly, half of them log in to online community services every month, and nearly one third use online chatrooms monthly for discussions (TNS Gallup, 2012). The Internet has also become an increasingly important tool for finding political information during elections (SVT, 2011). Such volumes attract both politicians – who, for instance, have been busy connecting with potential voters on Facebook (J. Väliverronen, 2011, p. 146) – and the media, which are also paying closer attention to citizens in political journalism. General marketing research methods in journalism (see e.g. Hujanen, 2008) now have at least an indirect influence on political journalists' work, too, while journalists have used citizens' online comments on political issues in their stories for a number of years. Some media houses have occasionally gone further than that: a number of participatory political journalism projects have been conducted around the country since the late 1990s (for some examples, see Ahva, 2010), and most recently, the main national daily *Helsingin Sanomat* has arranged a series of open data meetings between journalists and citizens with a view to new innovations in political journalism, too.

Despite citizens' increasing influence, their views on the media in the political public sphere have attracted little attention by researchers. People's opinions about the media in general are well-known: trust in the media remains fairly low in comparison with other institutions in society, but relatively high in international comparison (Borg, 2007). Moreover, in citizens' view, the media are considered to have too much power in society (Haavisto & Kiljunen, 2011, pp. 25–26). However, the few empirical studies conducted show that the criticism presented at a general level does not seem to materialize fully when the focus is on political reporting and the media's performance in that area. In the mid-1990s, citizens'

critical stance on the media's performance was evident both during the 1994 presidential election campaign (Jääsaari & Savinen, 1995, p. 54) and the coverage of the run-up to the referendum about Finland's European Union membership later the same year (Kivikuru, 1996, pp. 335–341; Alastalo, 1996, pp. 377–387). At the turn of the millennium, some of the negativity had disappeared. Political journalism was seen by citizens to promote freedom of speech and openness in the political sphere, but it was also criticised for an excessive concentration on entertainment, politicians' private lives, and their personas (Koski, 2002).

However, subsequent developments in citizens' opinions about the media's performance in the political public sphere in Finland remain in the dark since no empirical studies on the subject have been done since Koski's work. This is surprising given the recent changes in both political reporting and citizens' role in the public sphere. This article attempts to fill the gap in research by investigating the latest developments in the relations between citizens and the media and by comparing how citizens' views and agendas have changed over time – if at all. Based on these observations, the paper will also consider what kind of "public connection" (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007) the media foster in Finland and what effects it may have for the political public sphere in the future.

Sample and Methods

Citizens' views are observed in connection with a series of events commonly known in Finland as the "election funding crisis," which is regarded as an example of the changed relations between politicians and the media. The events started in May 2008 when a leading Member of Parliament said on national TV that he would not follow the law and disclose the names of the financial contributors to his 2007 parliamentary election campaign as "the law carries no penalty for those not doing so." The remark was quickly picked up by the media, and it triggered a chain of events that lasted over three years and became the biggest media scandal in Finnish political history. The coverage included broader discussions about structural problems in the election funding legislation as well as numerous revelations about politicians' alleged or real wrongdoings in their campaign funding, including high-profile names such as the then-Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen who was accused of accepting bribes from a construction company. The

role of the media in the events was considered exceptionally big as the coverage led to changes in legislation and to many politicians' resignations. Moreover, the media's way of reporting the events was so aggressive that it received plenty of criticism even from journalists. (Kantola, Vesa & Hakala, 2011, pp. 65–70; 82–85.)

It is assumed that journalists' active interventions in this exceptional series of events have also elicited numerous and varying responses from citizens about the current state of the media and journalism in the political public sphere. Here, the focus is on those opinions, and the aim of the paper is to find out what kind of agendas citizens have for and against the media. To be more exact, three things are observed: how citizens evaluate the media, journalism, and journalists; what citizens expect of them; and what they do not accept of them. The following analysis is based on three samples where citizens have had the possibility to evaluate and criticize the above-mentioned actors in different environments and at different times of the election funding crisis²:

Two nationally representative surveys about citizens' views on politics, politicians' behaviour and the media's actions during the crisis. The surveys were conducted in February–March 2010 (N=1057) and January 2011 (N=1164).³ In this paper, the focus is solely on citizens' assessment of the media's performance.

Citizens' messages about journalism and journalists during the crisis in two major online chatrooms: one mainstream media's website (tabloid *Italehti*, N=375), and one community service (Suomi24, N=571).⁴ The messages were gathered in September–December 2009 and in September 2010 in conjunction with the media coverage and subsequent court handling of allegations against Prime Minister Vanhanen.⁵

Citizens' diaries about the crisis, written by 23 volunteers participating in a co-operative project between the universities of Tampere, Jyväskylä, and Helsinki, in winter 2010.⁶

The surveys have been analysed statistically, while for the other two samples, a qualitative content analysis approach has been used. The aim has been to create an overview of citizens' opinions with the analysis of the two surveys, the results of which are presented first, and then to broaden the picture with the other two samples.

Results

The election funding crisis received plenty of publicity, and citizens followed the events actively through the media. Only about two per cent of citizens said in the January 2011 survey that they had not paid attention to the issue in the media at all. The ranking for the most popular media for keeping abreast of the topic followed past observations on media use (see e.g. Karppinen & Jääsaari, 2007, p. 6): TV at the top with about 60 per cent of citizens using it frequently to catch up with the events, and subscription newspapers second with nearly half of citizens as frequent followers. These two were favoured especially by the older age groups. The Internet was the third most popular source of information on the election funding crisis with a 30 per cent share overall, and in the under-25 and low-income groups it was already the most popular choice.

A closer look at citizens' evaluations of reporting indicates their critical stance on the media during the election funding crisis. None of the media assessed received positive reviews in all the categories, and citizens seemed particularly annoyed by the tabloids' reporting style. (See Table 1 below.) Even though citizens' past perceptions of different media surely have an effect on their judgements, their rather extensive following of the events of the crisis through several media renders the results at least indicative estimations of different media's reporting in this case.

An interesting feature of citizens' assessments was the fact that an increase in the following of any medium resulted in increasing critique of its reporting. This may result from a few things. First, based on their own observations, citizens may simply have found the reporting below standard. Secondly, it can be a case of "shooting the messenger": the reporting of a negative issue may lead to negative feedback regardless of the quality of journalism. Thirdly, an increase in critique may come about as a consequence of saturation: constant and extensive reporting on a topic may begin to bore people, no matter its quality. This final point may at least partly explain why citizens' evaluations of media coverage were more critical throughout in 2010 than in 2011. The autumn of 2009 saw a peak in reporting with a number of high-profile cases which must have been fresh in citizens' memory at the time of the first survey, while a year later such cases were fewer in quantity (see Kantola, Vesa & Hakala, 2011, p. 72; Kantola, 2011c, pp. 225–226).

In a closer examination of the different statements,

| Statement → Attitude barometer ↓ | The coverage is sensationalistic. | | The coverage is fair and objective. | | The coverage is trustworthy. | | The coverage is interesting. | |
|--|--------------------------------------|------|--|------|---------------------------------|------|---------------------------------|------|
| | 2010 | 2011 | 2010 | 2011 | 2010 | 2011 | 2010 | 2011 |
| Television | +32 | +24 | +3 | +11 | +27 | +43 | +23 | +30 |
| Subscription papers | +14 | +9 | 0 | +5 | +28 | +36 | +17 | +23 |
| Tabloids | +70 | +73 | -40 | -42 | -39 | -35 | -21 | -10 |
| Internet | +30 | +30 | -13 | -10 | -8 | -5 | -1 | -1 |

Attitude barometer: The scores given show the difference between positive and negative responses to the statements in percentage points. Positive scores indicate agreement with the statements and negative scores disagreement. The maximum score in any slot is 100 (everyone agrees with the statement) or -100 (everyone disagrees with it). NB! “Don’t know” answers are regarded as neutral.

Table 1. Citizens’ estimations of media coverage of the election funding crisis in 2010 and 2011.

it can be seen that citizens’ trust in the coverage was biggest in the two most followed media – that is to say, TV and subscription newspapers, with TV reporting regarded as trustworthy by two thirds of citizens in 2011 and newspaper reporting receiving a similar verdict from around 60 per cent of people the same year. This is a big increase compared to recent studies where trust in TV has been at around 50 per cent of the population and in the press at around 35 per cent (Borg, 2007, p. 11). However, in those studies, the object of measurement was trust in the medium as such rather than trust in its reporting, which has a bearing on the results. Moreover, with the press, the less-than-favourable assessment in previous studies has been attributed to the poor reputation of the tabloids (Borg, 2007, p. 24), and it was confirmed in these surveys as well. In the evaluation of online coverage, nearly one third of citizens thought the coverage was trustworthy, slightly over a third were sceptical, and one third were undecided. The proportion of those undecided was considerably higher than in assessments of other media and remained constant with other statements as well, mainly due to the over-65s’ relatively low use of the Internet. For instance, in 2011, 46 per cent of over-65s used the Internet monthly while in the entire population the proportion was 86 per cent (TNS Gallup, 2012).

In the other statements, citizens’ assessments seem partially contradictory to previous findings. In the Finnish context, trustworthiness in journalism is often

associated with neutral, fair and objective reporting, but according to citizens, these features were not necessarily in evidence in the reporting. In their view, no media’s reporting of the election funding crisis could be called neutral; instead, sensationalistic was a more apt description, in the case of tabloids more blatantly so than with others.

Also, the strong connection between fair and objective reporting on one hand and trustworthiness on the other seems to have eroded partially. With online reporting and tabloids, the connection still seems to work in a fairly straightforward fashion as both are regarded as neither trustworthy or fair and objective. The only objection to this is the under-25 age group in the 2010 survey: then, they found online reporting fair and objective, but not trustworthy. However, with television and subscription newspapers the differences are greater: their reporting is by and large considered trustworthy, but the same cannot be said of fairness and objectivity. The impact of reporting in late 2009 was to be seen in the 2010 survey opinions throughout all ages and social groups, and especially over-65s voiced critical opinions.

Citizens’ feelings of sensationalistic reporting can be explained partly by the special nature of the events. The election funding crisis brought to light many long-standing structural problems in the election funding legislation, and the sudden and extensive revelations by the media may have evoked a sense of excess in people. Another important reason for citizens’ assessments was clearly the evolution of political

journalism, especially the increased media competition. As a consequence of these, even TV and subscription papers – which had previously used a distant and respectful way of reporting about politics – changed their tone of coverage to something resembling online outlets' and tabloids' style (Kantola, Vesa & Hakala, 2011, pp. 82–85).

The national broadcaster YLE and the nation's major daily *Helsingin Sanomat* were the most active outlets in the election funding crisis with their revelations (Kantola, Vesa & Hakala, 2011, pp. 72–73), and their aggressive reporting style also represented a break with their traditions. This explains partly why citizens were so critical of fairness and objectivity issues in TV and subscription paper coverage, and the sense of unfair reporting may have been increased by the nature of events. The critical coverage of the election funding crisis focused mainly on the ruling Centre Party whose members were often accused of transgressions. Not surprisingly, supporters of the party were far more likely than others to find the reporting unfair in both surveys.

As for the interest evoked by the reporting, citizens' opinions were largely in line with their other assessments. People found TV and subscription paper news the most interesting, followed by online news and tabloid reporting. The clearest differences here could be seen between age groups: those under 35 considered election funding crisis reporting in every media far less interesting than the older groups. The reason lies in the topic. Politics has not interested young people in the same way as older people (Grönlund, Paloheimo & Sundberg, 2005, pp. 89–90), and as youngsters have also been noted to be less knowledgeable about politics than their elders (Grönlund, 2009, p. 182; Rapeli, 2010, p. 122), the lack of interest shown by youngsters here is no surprise.

In citizens' evaluations of interest, it is worth noting one discrepancy. Though citizens regarded tabloids' reporting as clearly sensationalistic, unfair, not objective, and untrustworthy, the reporting was not considered as uninteresting as one might initially have thought. A similar feature can be seen in evaluations of online reporting, albeit to a lesser degree. This can be explained with changes in society. As the power of individuals has increased the question of whether news is interesting or not is decided more by a "bottom-up" than a "top-down" process (cf. Kantola, 2011a, pp. 19–20; 24–25; Kantola, 2011b, p. 118). Thus, the concept of "interesting" becomes more

ambiguous than before – it can be anything from new information to a clever headline or an emotionally touching story. In this situation, tabloids and online news sites can be argued to have an advantage: their survival has always depended on their ability to create interest in their stories – one way or another.

Citizens' online messages and diary entries largely confirm and illustrate the survey findings, but they also reveal a change in citizens' agenda. This is best seen in citizens' basic attitude towards the media. Even though in the surveys reporting about the election funding crisis received plenty of criticism, in other forums citizens often praised the media for bringing the matter up actively and in an interesting way. For instance, more than half of the diary writers lauded journalists for unearthing the problems. In another indication of praise, only 14 per cent of primary critique in the entire online message board sample was directed at journalists compared to the politicians' 59 per cent share. Though the average user of both online services studied here is aged under 45⁷, the change is not merely a generational shift: active and even adversarial journalism received support from older diary writers too. A clear sign of citizens' changed expectations was often in evidence in comments where past reporting practices were contrasted with current ones:

Finally the media are working they way they should. They need to dig up the dirt in politics at all costs, sparing no effort. (Writer, Suomi24)

During the election funding crisis I have noticed that sometimes the media can actually fulfil their role as the fourth estate. (Diary writer)

It appears that citizens' respect for active journalism first observed at the turn of the millennium (Koski, 2002) has come to stay. However, the limits of aggressive and adversarial style were a highly contentious issue for citizens during the crisis. Over a third of the diary writers found the reporting interesting and annoying at the same time. While the issue was considered important, its extensive coverage seemed to have pushed the writers beyond saturation point: they felt that more important things were beginning to be left without due consideration.

On the message boards, saturation was not thought of as a major problem – probably because writers there usually had a considerably shorter attention span than diary authors. In a similar vein to past observations (Pietilä, 2002) they seldom engaged in meaningful

long-standing dialogue with each other. In addition, they commented in their entries on daily topics brought up by the media rather than long-term developments. For instance, in the Suomi24 forum, 45 per cent of the discussion threads studied here were started either with a link to a new story in the media, direct quotations of a story, or the author's description of a story. The percentage only includes the threads where the author has explicitly mentioned the target medium in the opening message; thus, the number of threads actually based on traditional media is much bigger than this. Therefore, it appears that citizens' evaluations of journalism are strongly based on the media's agenda (cf. Heikkilä et al., 2010, p. 13).

The daily reporting was enough to give citizens on the message boards plenty of reasons for critique, even though their basic attitude towards journalism during the election funding crisis was positive (see Table 2 below). This reflects a typical situation on message boards: discussion spreads into numerous threads.

found the sharp focus of reporting on the Centre Party and Mr Vanhanen unfair: in their opinion, accepting less-than-well documented election funding had become a general practice among politicians – the “Finnish way” – over the years. Such evaluations were often linked to ponderings on journalists' political background, especially their possible leftist sympathies.

Partly the same journalists who for decades turned a blind eye to the bags of money which were passed from the East as well as from the West on to our left-wing parties⁸, have now become “courageous and truth-desiring.” That is untrustworthy and indicates a selective moral background – it is “truth-seeking” in inverted commas. These people now see it as their obligation to condemn [Mr Vanhanen] of a crime while knowingly letting others go scot-free. (Writer, Suomi24)

| Object of citizens' journalism critique | Suomi24 (%) | Iltalehti (%) | Overall (%) |
|---|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| Violation of truthfulness | 21 | 27 | 24 |
| Violation of journalistic autonomy | 23 | 18 | 21 |
| <i>Acting as a mouthpiece for a party</i> | 13 | 11 | 13 |
| <i>Acting as a mouthpiece for politicians, etc.</i> | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| <i>Other such violation (e.g. over-commercialism)</i> | 6 | 3 | 5 |
| Violation of fairness and objectivity | 33 | 23 | 29 |
| <i>Having a political mission</i> | 19 | 13 | 16 |
| <i>Sensationalism in reporting</i> | 10 | 6 | 8 |
| <i>Violating rules on fairness & objectivity</i> | 4 | 5 | 4 |
| Violation of trustworthiness and credibility | 10 | 12 | 11 |
| Other critique | 13 | 19 | 15 |
| <i>Critique of journalists as persons</i> | 6 | 9 | 7 |
| <i>Critique, other than aforementioned kind</i> | 5 | 7 | 6 |
| <i>Critique, object unclear</i> | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Total (%) | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Total N of messages | 571 | 375 | 946 |

NB! Due to rounding error, the percentages do not always add up to 100.

Table 2. Citizens' primary critique of journalism on the message boards of Iltalehti and Suomi24

Citizens' evaluations complement the survey results. Journalism and journalists were accused on the message boards of violating some of the traditional tenets of reporting – fairness and objectivity, neutrality, and truthfulness. Such critique emanated largely from the reporting about the Centre Party – and especially Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen who faced the brunt of the media's accusations. Many writers felt, however, that this reporting contained oversimplification, withholding of important information, and even downright lies. Moreover, they

Of all media outlets, the national broadcaster YLE was regarded as the biggest culprit. Nearly 60 per cent of citizens' critique was directed either at it as an institution or at its individual journalists. In the sharpest criticisms, the company was accused of trying to stage a leftist coup through its “party journalists”. Such critique of YLE accounted for 5 per cent of all the media critique from citizens; other outlets very seldom received similar accusations.

Another major point of citizens' critique was directed at sensationalistic reporting, which was