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When the mainstream takes over: Political magazines' attempts to meet alternativeness in Finland

Abstract

Finland belongs to the few European countries which have kept alive its party press, but now the foul winds are strong. During the past five years, the shrinking party press, one by one, has changed formats from newspapers to a combination of magazines and websites. These political voices, ranging from conservative to communist, are intriguingly contradictory, as they have moved to the web with support from one of the oldest media forms — the magazine.

Finland thus provides an 'end result' of a development of a problem met by many European mediascapes today: what is the role of ideological journalism in a situation which prefers speed and topicality? A magazine could provide more space for alternativeness: time axis, feature style, personal views.

However, based on the present study's findings, a change of format does not seem to be the solution. Parties have continued the practice of replacing journalism by marketing communication in a desperate effort to try and develop 'something different'. The six party journals examined in this study can be divided into two groups, but in fact, all their expression modes tend to repeat mainstream neutralism. Their ideological markers are limited to choice of themes, interviewees and pictures—and during the research project, one of the most independent-sounding voices shifted to a quarterly.

Keywords: Party media, Magazine, Political journalism, Mainstream media, Alternative media

The documented weakening of serious journalism in the face of fake news, hate speech and other forms of social media campaigns perhaps has overshadowed multiple changes occurring in the partisan journalism profession. In Western Europe, the conventional party press has declined radically despite studies indicating that media-party parallelism mobilises citizens to vote, particularly those who are not politically interested (van Kempen 2007). In Eastern Europe, intensive forms of party control over the media have developed. Petér Bajomi-Lázár (2014) argues that differences in politicization of the news media are rooted in differences in party structures between old and new democracies.

Furthermore, the extended use of the digital sphere has caused political polarization that is viewed as posing a serious challenge to democracies worldwide. Researchers have found that

polarization has occurred across social media platforms, but that it cannot be viewed as a unified phenomenon, as significant cross-platform differences exist (Yarchy & al. 2021).

So, what is ideological journalism's role in present-day societies' evolution toward preferring faster transmission speed, topicality and format-based expressions? The following case from Finland provides an example of such a development. A specific characteristic in the history of the Finnish mediascape is ideological media's strong role, originating from complex political contradictions near the turn of the 20th century. The first wave of media was created by the struggle between the Swedish-speaking cultural and economic elite, and the Finnish-speaking majority, when the country was a grand duchy under the Russian czar. The second source of ideological differences in media entailed the harsh contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the working class, resulting in a bitter civil war in 1918, right after the country had gained political independence.

After World War II, the media were an elemental part of the Finnish social contract in constructing the welfare state, enjoying their status as a national institution, with the national broadcasting company YLE playing a significant role in this process (Nieminen, 2010, p. 55). Although party papers died out a long time ago in most European countries, Finland has maintained a small, but lively, party press in recent decades. Large and sparsely populated, Finland also has maintained a strong regional press, which gradually has weakened, but still holds a significant position. An additional nuance in the Finnish newspaper scene is the Swedish-language newspaper press, comprising six publications and serving Finland's Swedish speakers,¹ a group comprising 450,000. Another half a dozen weekly newspapers also serve this audience.

In short, the country's mediascape has been exceptionally multifaceted and full of nuances, allowing for a variety of opinions to be aired and proliferate.

In 1946, 35% of the newspapers in Finland were politically independent, with party papers comprising the majority. Today, around 96% of Finnish newspapers call themselves independent. Print party papers have become rarities in present-day Finland (Jyrkiäinen, 2017). The shift away from party affiliation has been particularly swift since World War II. The conservative Coalition Party and the Agrarian Centre Party have experienced the most dramatic changes. Both had

¹ The number of registered Swedish speakers in Finland is around 290,000 (5,2 % of the population), and additionally, almost 200,000 Finns view themselves as bilingual.

strong, large-circulation presses, but now have only biweekly magazines. However, the journalism in many of today's independent papers still contains vestiges of their earlier party affiliations (Holmberg, 2004, pp. 239-242), particularly among regional papers that previously were once attached to political parties. In short, the multiplicity of voices and the variety of expression forms in the Finnish mediascape seem to be decreasing. At least partly, this is a consequence of a change in the system of press subsidies.

In the name of promoting democracy, all Finnish Parliament parties receive public money for political publicity, but in recent years, they have not always directed these funds to the party press. Many parties have invested more in public relations, strategic communication and social media. Marketing exercises to promote the political press are minimal. In the past, labour and farmer organisations also supported like-minded papers with reduced subscription prices.

The expansion of digital media has complicated the situation further. In October 2019, a large parliamentary party, the Green Party, decided to cease its print media involvement completely. The party leadership stated that the print version of its paper, *Vihreä Lanka* (), did not generate enough publicity, and that they aimed to invest more in social media.² The paper, founded in 1983, shifted to a magazine format in 2016. At the end of 2019, its circulation was around 10,000, but its readership mostly comprised party members receiving it as a membership benefit.

However, in August 2020, the Green Party established a new membership magazine, *Vihreä (Green)*. The glossy magazine is described as a non-journalistic membership organ³ and comes out twice a year. It mostly runs interviews with Green politicians, and production is outsourced to an international firm that specialises in marketing (Aller Ideas). Whereas *Vihreä Lanka* had a considerably free, critical publishing policy, the new magazine held a different policy line: the voice of party leadership (Mäkinen, 2020). Thus, this new magazine seems to epitomise the shift from journalism to marketing. A similar shift can be found among various membership journals that have dropped their paper magazine formats and invested in online services due to efficiency. However, in most cases, they also are experiencing financial problems.

Some researchers (e.g., Ruohonen, 2019; Ruostetsaari, 2019) have reflected on the gradual weakening of party voices in the Finnish mediascape, anticipating their total disappearance due to

² Riikka Suominen, editor of *Vihreä Lanka*, radio interview, 23 October 2019.

³ Green Party Secretary Veli Liikanen, Twitter, 14 January 2020.

increased liberalism in the use of state-supported funds and somewhat-naïve trust in web-based journalism. Researchers have found that the disappearance of party papers leads to reduced internal debate and a strengthening of party leadership power. Furthermore, a large group of policy professionals now is employed as political or communication advisors in government ministries and parliamentary party groups, or as party organisational leaders (Allern & al, 2021).

The political map has changed simultaneously with the shift away from party affiliation. The previously stable 'big four' setup—two big parties in government and two in the opposition—has broken down. Today, six medium-size parties are fighting for power and visibility, along with several smaller, emerging parties. Impacting the mediascape, this broad, shaky panorama requires that party papers catch the eyes of people beyond their conventional supporters. In short, while challenges have multiplied, the applied solutions appear to have been found in marketing and strategic communication, rather than journalism. However, '[t]he conventional wisdom (or hypothesis) in today's media landscape is that political journalism in its traditional formats and genres, disseminated by the legacy media organisations, will gradually wither away. Thus far, these prophecies have failed' (Allern & al., 2021, p. 147).

Problem-setting: disappearing or coming back?

The roots of party press exist in two dimensions. The 'milder' form emerged around the turn of the 19th century in the U.S. For example, an editor would endorse a party's candidates in his publication and receive financial support for his paper in return (Bulla, 2014). Vanguard papers have represented a more militant form of partisan media, but since the birth of penny papers in the 19th century, partisan and party media have played a different role than entertainment-oriented mass papers, providing an alternative that expresses—at least to a certain extent—antagonisms in reality and potentials for change. Christian Fuchs does not view alternative media only as an alternative to the mainstream,⁴ but links them to qualities of critical activity (Fuchs, 2010). Herbert Pimlott (2019, pp. 32-39) shares this view, but stresses that today, the concept of vanguard media needs redefinition. Since Lenin's time, party papers have been a major outlet for reaching out to potential supporters. Their historical functions have been agitation and

⁴ The study of alternative media has distinguished between several perspectives on alternativeness, from community media and dominant discourses vs. small-scale to counter-hegemonic approaches.

propaganda. Vanguard media have been viewed as part of organisations subjected to controls, constraints and hierarchies originating from their organisational structure.

In recent decades, vanguard media's agitation function largely has been replaced by an organisational function to enable internal communication within parties or movements. According to Pimlott, control has become party papers' main function, as they provide a two-way channel for internal communication. Thus, the propaganda function largely has been replaced by a bridge function, and yet, another new shift seems to be underway: The bridge is changing into a network better fitted to the digitally dominant communication environment in which we are living. However, even today, vanguard media cannot be viewed as 'speaking to a single, unifying worldview or ideology' yet (Pimlott, 2019, pp. 40-41). The core of alternativeness remains, but an element of strategic communication can be found easily in present-day activities, and one can even ask whether a vanguard function can be interpreted as strategic today.

If we accept Pimlott's interpretation, party papers have turned inward in recent decades, preferring to speak only to their own cadres, and have lost interest in reaching out to potential supporters on the outside. The situation in Finland seems to support such a view. The few remaining party media with limited circulations serve the bridge function, but elements of strategic communication often can be detected, particularly from present-day parties' online activities. The Nordic 'Omnibus' strategy—news media covering news, opinions, culture, sports and entertainment—has become more and more difficult to achieve with the scarce resources available, particularly because of the growing dominance of 'newsification' in mainstream journalism (Kivikuru, 2011).

More theoretically, elaborations about politics of presence (e.g. Phillips 1998/2003) bring us close to the question of political papers' relevance today. According to Phillips, alternative politics or as she calls it, the politics of ideas, is incapable of dealing with political exclusion. She challenges assumptions that democracy functions well without the presence of disadvantaged groups. The politics of presence establishes a different balance between accountability and autonomy⁵. Applied to the Finnish situation today, the sheer existence of party media could thus be interpreted as strengthening democracy.

⁵ Politics of presence is a concept used in feminist studies discussing, for example, how production of difference can be brought about via women quotas in political decision-making.

Today's Finnish party press of 13 publications has migrated to the web, accompanied by print media published weekly or monthly. This change in the mediascape has been attributed to a loss of readership and decreasing funds. The notion that journalism is switching to public relations and social media also has been expressed frequently. It seems that the chosen path is to capture attention with short, lively impressions and claims via Twitter and Facebook so that a party's voice bypasses journalistic gatekeepers. Consequently, this change does not seem to be driven only by financial reasons, eliciting the question of whether ideological journalism is shifting to marketing. This development is notable from various perspectives. First, it is worth investigating into which media formats the website-plus-magazine combination evolves. Does the older medium of the magazine have any chance of capturing attention? Second, how has the shift modified contact with the public? Does the website-plus-magazine combination allow for bipolar communication, networking and social media platforms? Third, what role does Finland's media history play in present-day ideological journalism with limited resources: region-based centrism; working-class rhetoric; or religion-based bourgeois values? In short, does this new situation with different expression modes also drive party media toward new editorial approaches?

Core of alternativeness?

The questions raised in the problem-setting section lead to interesting, partly contradictory notions about the complicated relationship among the media, culture, politics and citizens (Atton, 2002; Couldry, 2010; Downing et al., 2002; Martín-Barbero, 1992). They all deal with alternativeness, but the concept can be discussed from very different perspectives, as Chris Atton (2019, pp. 1–18) emphasised.

With the exception of Pimlott, most sources have viewed alternativeness as various sets of values and working habits inside of and surrounding journalism. Atton (2002) distinguished between alternative products (e.g., news values, formats, newsroom organisations and counterhegemonic ideas) and alternative processes (e.g., de-professionalisation, native journalism and different distribution modes). Tony Harcup (2005) stated that alternativeness often has been positioned as an opposition to the mainstream that disregards the organisational mode. These distinctions have been essential to the study of journalism. Atton and James Hamilton (2008, p. 140) emphasised that 'additional challenges to commercial-popular journalism are likely to persist, yet the relationship between alternative and mainstream journalism is not a one-way street'.

Michael Traber (1985) presented a completely different definition, describing alternativeness as 'change toward a more equitable social, cultural and economic whole in which the individual is not reduced to an object (of the media or the political powers), but is able to find fulfilment as a total human being' (Traber, 1985, p. 3). Traber's definition comes close to Paulo Freire's of 'being fully human' (Freire, 1970), and Traber certainly was a true Freirean. His definition is far from Pimlott's claims about the need to redefine vanguard media. Traber's definition sounds idealistic and demanding, but can be interpreted as allowing space for ideological journalism.

Another relevant aspect is the magazine as a mode of expression. Is this old format flexible enough to tolerate alternativeness, participation and debate? As Marcia Prior-Miller (2015, pp. 22–37) demonstrated, it is extremely difficult to frame a succinct, unique, ahistorical description of the essence of the magazine. Defining the magazine periodical poses challenges unique to time, culture and technology.

In the older mode of party newspapers, the scrutinised media faced an unfavourable situation, as they were slow and loaded with party traditions. However, the shift to a new format may force them to develop new working procedures.

Thus, the magazine might have the strength needed to carry political discussions and debate, particularly when giving due attention to Göran Bolin's (2014) concept of media generations. Discussing the complexity of participation in media use, Bolin analysed the differences in media user generations' perspectives on historical events in both their objective and subjective media landscapes. For example, applied to the present study, reader generations can experience different aspects of political activities as hostile or supportive, topical or nostalgic. The idea of what is and is not political might differ across reader generations. To reach several segments of the public, a party journal must have an articulation strategy, but Bolin's highly sophisticated apparatus cannot be applied to the extensive content in the current study, and his perspective focusses on reception, not production, of media content.

Perhaps the most suitable guide for this empirical analysis comes from Thomas Tufte's (2015, pp. 63–70) memory work strategies. Tufte's argument is constructed around three perspectives on memory work: public memory as rhetorical strategy; memory's political dimension; and translation in memory work. He views memory work as civic engagement.

Based on a kind of frame analysis, Tufte developed strategies viewed as conservative for maintaining a position or advocating change. In his thinking, the media reinforce majority memories, often supported with visuals that tend to simplify the issue. However, on the fringes of these dominant memories lie memories of inequities, resistance and criticism of dominant memories. The media play a role in the construction of resistance, although they most often tend to reinforce elements already existing in society, such as names, notions, pictures and caricatures.

In my analysis, public memory as a rhetorical strategy appeared most useful. I viewed public memory as collectively shared memories in journalistic texts. Naturally, to a certain extent, public memory remains a contested field in which negotiations take place, and some stories dominate, while others are silenced. However, I found it uncomplicated to develop traits from collectively shared and silenced memories that could be constructed into frames.

Two rounds of analysis

Empirical analyses of magazines and website content are complicated to perform. The mode of the magazine comprises not only text and pictures, but also the whole package, including layout, style, tools and patterns of small and large articles. Repetition also holds significance and should be included in the analysis. Consequently, the choice falls to qualitative methods, but they also encounter challenges.

The analysis took place in two rounds. I used a combination of frame analysis,⁶ including close reading⁷ in the second round of the analysis, while the first round was based only on qualitative content analysis. Frame analysis evaluates images, stereotypes, metaphors, actors, messages and forms of address. As formulated by Robert Entman (1993, p. 52), frame analysis can be used to define problems, diagnose a course, make value judgements and suggest remedies.

In the first rough round, I included all nine then-existent (2019) party magazines and their websites. The analysis covered three issues in each magazine (end of 2019) and their websites. The results were as expected. One-third of the journals, or rather party bulletins,⁸ only reported

⁶ Erving Goffman introduced frame analysis in the 1970s, and several versions of it are used in media research.

⁷ Close reading is a popular method in literary research, and it recently also has been used in social sciences research. In short, close reading can be described as a thoughtful, disciplined reading of a text that pays attention, e.g., to individual words and the order in which ideas unfold in sentences.

⁸ Christian Democrats' *KD-lehti (KD Paper)*, the Independence Party's *IPU* and Swedish Liberal's *Medborgarbladet (Citizens' Paper)*. The Swedish-language Social Democrats' *Arbetsbladet (Workers' Paper)* was not assessed as a party bulletin and was left out of the second round because it already included one Social Democratic journal (*Demokraatti*).

what was happening in their party organizations. They provided the bridge function that Pimlott discussed, although their two-way channel was very narrow: The bulletins simply recorded meetings and leadership changes, among other developments. These bulletins were excluded from the second round.

During the second round, I selected six journals that reported on a considerably wider range of issues⁹ in their magazines and websites. These magazines had close connections to their parties, but also carried content on society and news, along with comments and debates. They were all subscription-based, but not automatically linked to party membership. During this round, I performed a two-phase examination. First, I analysed the particularities of each journal's editorial line, scrutinising entire issues. Second, I selected a few wider articles from each issue for deeper scrutiny, using the thicker teeth of frame analysis. The website content analysis was significantly cruder, covering predominantly text and picture themes, as well as the style of address.

The second round employed the whole range of tools for memory work. I focussed on selected reporting and picture themes, event coverage, reporting style, vocabulary and metaphors, as well as the use of authorities and experts. The aim was to draft articulations of particular advocacy, indicating some form of uniqueness – that is politics of presence in the mediascape.

Empirical analysis: markers of similarity and difference

The three or four issues from each paper comprised the last issues of 2019 and the first issues of 2020. Only large 'main' articles were selected for close reading. All the magazines had a large volume of small dispatches that primarily, but not exclusively, covered party news. For example, *Nykypäivä* (*Present Day*), *Suomenmaa* (*Finnish Country*) and *Kansan Uutiset* (*People's News*) also covered general news items. All carried several columns in each issue, while *Demokraatti* (*The Democrat*), *Nykypäivä* and *Suomenmaa* also published columns by invited members of other parties. No columns were included in the textual analysis because they used a different format style, but the number of columns was interpreted as a marker of the multiplicity of voices.

⁹ The Social Democrats' *Demokraatti*, Left Alliance's *Kansan Uutiset*, the Centre Party's *Suomenmaa*, the Coalition Party's *Nykypäivä*, the Communist Party's *Tiedonantaja* and the Finns Party's *Perussuomalainen*. The Green Party's *Vihreä Lanka* would have been included in the second round, but was shut down before the sample period. The issues studied were from January to mid-March, depending on publication frequency. All issues were published before the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Nykypäivä had the highest number of columns, while *Perussuomalainen* (*True Finn*) had the lowest.

One general observation is that the studied journals did not bring politics of presence in a deeper sense into the Finnish mediascape. Their contribution was hardly ever unique, different themes or views. They all divided their content into two categories: party bulletins, with small dispatches and pictures focussing on party information, and larger texts that did not carry a strong party label. In some journals (particularly *Perussuomalainen*), the party bulletin took up almost all the space, while in other journals (*Demokraatti* and *Nykypäivä*), the party bulletin was small, with several large stories covering topical social and cultural themes in each issue. In all the issues studied, the larger texts included international content loosely supporting the journals' ideological line, but lacking any type of agitation.

Most of the larger articles followed a conventional news journalism style. Although not openly opinionated, they indirectly indicated their leanings distinctly more strongly than mainstream newspapers through choice of experts, visualisations and particular details elaborated upon. *Tiedonantaja* (*The Informer*) and *Perussuomalainen* provide exceptions to this style. *Tiedonantaja* predominantly, but not systematically, followed a classic agitation style, while *Perussuomalainen's* reporting was more difficult to characterise: Not systematic and barely journalistic, it resembled both documentary writing and colloquial speech. A mainstream journalism style was strongest in *Kansan Uutiset* and *Suomenmaa*. *Nykypäivä* and *Demokraatti* also used feature journalism characteristics, such as portrait interviews, debates and visual tricks.

Concerning elements about journals' own parties' actions and defences, *Perussuomalainen* was in its own category, reporting almost exclusively on the Finns Party's activities and representatives. More than 80% of its stories focussed on its own party, with larger independent articles difficult to find. Other parties and their representatives appeared only as opponents and rivals, and a few stories from abroad did not have any clear-cut political leanings. This populist party practised a strong advocacy style in its paper.

Kansan Uutiset, *Suomenmaa* and *Tiedonantaja* also indicated a clear focus on their own parties, with other parties mainly appearing as opponents. However, *Kansan Uutiset* frequently carried international reporting without direct political leanings and demonstrated a bias toward the Global South. Along with the Finnish News Agency STT, *Kansan Uutiset* used the *Guardian* and

Inter Press Service (IPS). *Suomenmaa*'s reporting had a distinct regional orientation, while *Tiedonantaja*'s style significantly varied from one issue to another. The journal included strong agitating journalism, but also feature stories, mostly about people mistreated by the system and particular employers. The Communist magazine also occasionally covered foreign stories with a party leaning, but no agitation elements.

A precise analysis of all the magazines' editorial policies would require a larger sample of issues. The formats and publishing policies of all the magazines examined appeared to fluctuate. The Coalition's *Nykypäivä* seems to have had a more stable publishing policy than the others, but the magazine shifted to a quarterly at the beginning of 2021, so it obviously did not fulfil the publisher's wishes. In an indication of wavering policy lines, three journals changed their layouts during the few months between the first and second rounds of the analysis, suggesting that their editorial lines obviously were in turmoil.

In the magazine-website combination, it appeared that the magazine—published only weekly, biweekly or monthly—was viewed as the main medium in this model, with the website used as an appendix for updates. The websites of the Left Alliance's *Kansan Uutiset* and the Coalition's *Nykypäivä*¹⁰ enjoyed considerably more independence than the rest, but even their coverage frequently referred to their paper journals. However, these websites were independent media, initiating their own stories, while the other sites primarily updated themes that first appeared in their magazines. This situation presented a contradiction: Slow magazines and fast websites seem to have ended up in the 'wrong' roles.

Based on a close reading of the main articles, in addition to the analysis of the format and setup, the six journals could be divided into two groups: the more outward-focussed *feature mix* group and the *party mix* group. The *feature mix* included journals that predominantly focus on society in general, but also indicate a party label in their reporting on issues. In this group, the larger articles discussed general political issues, such as national health policies, school reforms, unemployment and statistical forecasts. The *party mix* group was more inward-focussed, with journals in this group predominantly focussing on their own parties' activities, but sometimes including non-party elements.

¹⁰ *Nykypäivä*'s website has a different name, *Verkkouutiset* (Online News), but it is a twin of *Nykypäivä*.

The differences in results were not marked, but clear enough. The Coalition's *Nykypäivä* seemed to belong to the *feature mix* group, as did the Social Democrats' *Demokraatti*.¹¹ The Centre Party's *Suomenmaa* and the Left Alliance's *Kansan Uutiset* found their place in the *party mix* group, but both presented variations on sample issues. In the Communist Party's issues of *Tiedonantaja*, much stronger fluctuations were detected, e.g., one issue was characterised by general leftist themes, while the other advocated only its own party's supremacy. The Finns' colourful *Perussuomalainen* focussed on its own party alone and, thus, clearly fit into the *party mix* group.¹² Thus, no clear-cut division based on political leanings could be found.

In both categories, the main topics were political, although rarely limited to only the journals' own parties' opinions.¹³ Occasionally, the themes and writing style in *feature mix* magazines leaned toward tabloid elements, with strong words, one-sided argumentation and use of provocative pictures.¹⁴ These journals also included hidden opinions in their texts. They accurately explained other parties' stances, but implicitly indicated that these opinions differed from the journals' own policy lines. Openly political texts were made more palatable.

The *feature mix* journals seemed to leave space to form subjective mediascapes (Bolin, 2014) among their audiences by also covering less-political themes, from sports to food—presumably to meet the interests of various age and social groups. However, even these magazines seemed to address their own party groups primarily. In this community construction, the main target audience was middle-age, grassroots party activists. Particularly in *Demokraatti*, a deliberate focus on party women could be found. None of the journals showed an interest in constructing a special bridge to youth, though they covered youth organisations' elections and other activities. *Nykypäivä* maintained the same basic focus, but had a strong Helsinki orientation.

¹¹ In January 2020, *Demokraatti* published a special issue honouring the party's 125th birthday and including elements of the party's history. Consequently, this issue contained more party content than the other two issues in the sample.

¹² *Perussuomalainen*, January–March 2020.

¹³ For example, the February 2020 *Demokraatti* issue covered Finnish forests, family leave, working hours in various occupations, sportswomen with disabilities and theatre as politics. It also contained two columns by other party representatives. The March 2020 issue of *Nykypäivä* included coverage on teaching religion in schools; requirements for renewing occupational skills; family leave; its party's new vice chairs; interviews with the chief executive officer of Finland's Bank and his wife (Centre Party), the new head of the state forestry service (in a debate on forestry and global warming) and the head of the National Theatre; and two columns on Finnish politics (one past and one present issue).

¹⁴ The January 2020 issue of *Nykypäivä* carried 'Mahdoton maa hallita' ('A Country Impossible to Govern'), a long, neutral article with captioned pictures of the present and several past Finnish prime ministers taking stances on various issues. The issue also presented the article 'Kiinalaisraha levittäytyy tehokkaasti' ('Chinese Money Spreads Effectively') with a picture of a rat crawling toward the reader.

The texts in the *feature mix* journals consistently had a more general focus, describing recent phenomena with a political flavour. The *party mix* journals had similar themes, but they, particularly *Suomenmaa*, also frequently included reports from local party branches and officials. As the mother party, *Suomenmaa* had a strong regional orientation. It was the only magazine studied that occasionally seemed to emphasise young party activists' role deliberately, particularly that of women.

As expected, markers of togetherness and difference were divided easily into 'us' (the journals' own party members and activities) and 'them' (other political parties). The most revealing aspects turned out to be pictures—they almost always were of the journals' own people or preferred themes.¹⁵ A large group of markers comprised the names of experts, authorities, events and places.¹⁶ All the journals had a clear bias toward their own parties, with some focussing almost entirely on their own parties' themes and authorities. Only *Demokraatti* and, even more strongly, *Suomenmaa* seemed to exhibit a systematic emphasis on local aspects. Thus, most party media's ideological roots were easily recognisable, while the 'new' profiles remained fragile. The journal that seemed to have lost much of the mother party's old religion-linked conservative values was the Coalition's *Nykypäivä*, as the Christian dimension had disappeared.

However, all six journals— except the Communist *Tiedonantaja*—operated predominantly on an individual level, reporting individuals' comments on general themes or giving individuals a voice in columns and opinion pieces. Quite interestingly, personality interviews were rare, particularly in the *feature mix* magazines—where one might expect the opposite—but pictures, caricatures and jokes were used to describe individuals. In short, the top-down reporting mode resembled mainstream feature journalism, which cannot be viewed as encouraging participation. The *party mix* journals made stronger efforts to strengthen community feeling than the *feature mix* group, mainly by writing stories about participation and working in groups.

The magazines' websites presented content aimed at broadening the spectrum: The news-oriented journals presented online comments, blogs and recipes, while the feature-oriented

¹⁵ The magazine that used the most pictures related to its own party was the Centre Party's *Suomenmaa*. It also included visualisations linked to its party in stories on wider issues, such as political activities, the mining industry and the use of national dress. The magazine that followed this pattern to the second highest degree was the Communist Party's *Tiedonantaja*.

¹⁶ The magazines that devoted the most space to general reporting were the Coalition's *Nykypäivä* and the Social Democrats' *Demokraatti*. They often also used people belonging to other parties as experts.

journals placed news and topical stories online. Some journals¹⁷ seemed to offer something new in the magazinescape: lively feature stories with a social or political orientation, ideological discussions and interviews. Interestingly, all the websites also offered foreign news, while the print versions focussed strongly on domestic content. All did some work on Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, but the content on these was quite haphazard. All also carried content similar to party bulletins, including announcements of meetings, elections and other activities, but the scale of interest varied.

Generally, these magazines seemed to provide content for the formation of generation-based media landscapes (Bolin, 2014) among party supporters. For example, the authors of columns and blogs represented a wide spectrum of specialisations, age and gender groups, but more markers of controversy could have been expected to emerge. In the *feature mix* group, the tendency to use mainstream-style wording and expression formats—perhaps aimed at being apolitical—obviously attempted to develop community feeling via another route, offering information in a mode people encounter in present-day society on a daily basis. Thus, the magazines hardly added many nuances to the public memory.

The magazines' websites presented interesting differences. Some strongly resembled their magazines, while adding more up-to-date political and party news, while other websites¹⁸ offered more partisan views than the mild party views found in their magazines. Furthermore, contradictory editorial policies were found. *Kansan Uutiset's* website offered slightly more colourful, personalised feature journalism and greater topicality, while its magazine remained news-oriented. The *Tiedonantaja* website had several blogs, but contentious headlines and action-oriented right-on statements characterised its profile. All six journals offered options to comment on their websites. Some comments on different articles were published regularly, but no in-depth or ongoing discussion or debate was found in the studied journals and their websites.

In both groups, it was difficult to find encouragement of direct member participation or participatory journalism (Ahva, 2017) to allow readers some decision-making in the choice of material and style. However, coverage, especially in the *party mix* group, included local activism.

¹⁷ *Demokraatti* and *Nykypäivä* frequently published such stories, while *Kansan Uutiset* and *Tiedonantaja* did so only occasionally.

¹⁸ *Nykypäivä* and *Demokraatti* particularly stand out in this regard. However, *Nykypäivä* was reduced to four issues per year starting in 2021, as it decided to devote more resources to its website *Verkkouutiset*.

The journals gave credit for such activities but did not encourage debate. They reported about support for national figures in general surveys and asked party officials to comment on the figures but neglected ordinary people's opinions about them.

Discussion: Are there alternatives?

Based on the Finnish results, what kind of messages could be sent to partisan press activists in other countries? To be honest, there is not much comfort to give.

The multiplicity of ideological voices in the mediascape is fading away. The few small party media left have chosen expression modes close to the news media. The mainstream is taking over. The alternative journalism style and approach made available by the magazine format are rarely used, although the change in format obviously has created some uncertainty about the approach.

However, news is what dominates.

The country's media history could be assumed to provide a base for a politics of presence, uniqueness of themes and views, but it does not seem to play any larger role in present-day ideological journalism with limited resources. Shades of region-based centrism can occasionally be found in the Centre's *Suomenmaa*, as well as working-class rhetoric in the Communist *Tiedonantaja*, while signs of religion-based bourgeois values are hardly ever found anywhere in the bourgeois-linked magazines.

Another general conclusion, partly contradicting the above notion, is that the studied magazines seem to focus on their own parties' members and followers. They obviously try to develop harmony and community feelings among 'us', although they are ordinary, subscription-based media available to anyone. No serious attempts to reach out to outsiders can be found. General social discussion and debate voluntarily are left for big mainstream media, strong political stands are avoided, but myriad opinions are allowed. Undoubtedly, the basis for a politics of presence is difficult to reach, when group interests are slippery and identities multiple.

However, Pimlott's (2019) expectation that vanguard media will move toward strategic communication does not totally fit the case of Finnish party media. No doubt the status of the four journals categorised as party bulletins in the first round of the analysis is odd. It would be easier and more effective to drop the paper versions and publish exclusively online. Although this likely will happen in the long run, party organisations seem to believe that their followers are faithful to

paper-based credibility. The same pattern can be seen in the recently launched Green magazine *Vihreä*, which was not included in the sample because it was first published in the second half of 2020. *Vihreä* can be viewed as offering a new format for party bulletins: an outlook similar to mainstream popular magazine journalism, a reporting style resembling consumer journals and content strongly tied to the party, presented as a uniform, harmonious community without contradictions.

A similar tendency is found in several other parties that demonstrate reduced interest in the party press, as well as an explicit motivation to communicate via social media and public relations¹⁹. These parties seem to prefer self-controlled publicity to reach out to potential new supporters. Party bulletins seemingly are kept alive to satisfy the old cadres, and an understanding of the digital culture is not assumed to have developed among most party leaders.

Recently established political magazines seem to be comfortable only when they closely resemble mainstream journalism: They are strongly news-oriented; they do not cover a larger time frame in their reporting as they could as magazines; and their primary mode of expression is pale, neutral-looking reporting, far from the colourful, often vulgar expression styles characteristic particularly of working-class and agrarian papers of the past. It appears that these media have not found their 'we media' presentation modes and, thus, have ended up imitating the mainstream. They usually indicate their political bent through their choice of themes and experts, not their style of expression or text construction. They also provide limited coverage of international themes, again reflecting a characteristic typical of mainstream media. In Finnish dailies, the level of international news is high compared with publications in many other European countries.

A party journal could offer participatory, user-generated content or act as 'we media' without a formal editorial moderation or filtering process, as emphasised by Mark Deuze (2006), among others. Bolin's (2014) media generations complicate the application of participation in media practice: Older readers of party magazines and younger generations of party activists might have different 'we media'. The studied party bulletins do not recognise this difference, and their 'we media' are organisational based on party membership.

¹⁹ Attempts to reach self-control are frequent. The use of social media platforms, above all YouTube was larger than ever in the campaign before the Communal Elections in June 2021. In July 2021, a vivid mainstream media discussion about the role of politicians' fascination of social media was started by researcher Anu Koivunen (e.g. Helsingin Sanomat July 25, 2021). Further, in September 2021, the Christian Democratic Party bought tv-time from a religion-linked tv company AlfaTV for a weekly current news programme *Kompassi* produced by the Party.

Furthermore, the six party magazines studied in both rounds emerge as poor man's solutions to partisan journalism. The result is a magazine accompanied by a website with out-of-date news, spiced up with personality stories, political comments, baking recipes and last week's news about harness racing. Journalistically, these magazines appear to be like a sandwich lunch, accepting the nuances of conventional journalism and party information while trying to offer everybody something at a low cost. The strength of the magazine articles' explicit political leanings pushes the journals toward either the *party mix* or *feature mix* category. Not many serious attempts to encourage alternativeness or participation can be detected.

Again, Pimlott's idea of using such media as tools of strategic communication appears to be an overstated view, though it could gain slight support from a superficial scan of the most recent issues of these magazines. As communal elections approached in June 2021, all the studied magazines and their websites in both categories appeared to have moved closer to their parties. These journals do not have deliberate policy lines, instead settling on their present production modes because of history and routine, not thorough planning. An interesting finding is the lack of party-based expectations. One might think that leftist journals would have stronger ideological labelling than bourgeois journals, but this does not seem to be the case.

One might assert that journals based on more active attention and planning — e.g., the Coalition's *Nykypäivä* and the Social Democrats' *Demokraatti* — stand closer to a politically inclined, but independent, mode. However, the publisher (party organ) of *Nykypäivä* does not seem to be happy with its impact because as of 2021, the journal has been published only quarterly.

The magazine mode as such has received very little attention, neither among party cadres nor in the general public. The website-plus-magazine combination allows for bipolar communication. However, both the magazines and their websites seem biased toward an illusion of topicality, although the given circumstances would suggest a totally different approach for publications with scarce resources and slow production timetables. Obviously, topicality is a must in Finnish party journalism. A political publication must try to create an impression of topicality to preserve its credibility. This framework, which includes no serious elaborations on ideological basics, kills opportunities for debates and discussions.

Conversely, the magazine-plus-website combination, however modest, somewhat broadens the profiles of political papers produced with limited budgets. Two slightly different shades of

journalism are exercised in these media newsrooms: One offers a wider spectrum of themes and interviewees, devoting limited space for discussion, and the other has the same elements, but follows a stricter political line. Specifically, the *feature mix* magazines could offer interesting content for politically minded outsiders, but instead place long, interesting articles in their print magazines and short, colourful text on their websites. The articles seem to act as bait for active citizens interested in social issues, but the magazine issues come out so rarely that one hardly can imagine that they entice outsiders to step into their parties' ideological gardens with this long waiting period between issues. The media policy line and the division of work between the two media formats do not appear to have been planned thoroughly.

However, another explanation might help explain the magazine-plus-website combination's dynamic: The magazine might function as metatext or wrapping paper, like the cover of a commercial magazine (Iqani, 2012, pp. 9–12). The magazine's framing, phrasing, images and typography are geared toward convincing the reader that its content is interesting and credible. Thus, the magazine can be viewed as a credibility icon for old party members, i.e., the daily is gone, but the party still offers a special print edition standing for tradition and locality, which evokes a connection to other like-minded people. Thus, the magazine sends a reassuring message to old party supporters, while the website performs the role of attracting new voices to the party cadre. The magazine feeds supporters' self-identity, and individual text and pictures' role is not as important as the sheer existence of the print journal, an established mode of expression. As Neil Thurman and Richard Fletcher (2020) have stated, a total post-print existence may be less costly, but also more constrained, with much 'print attention' stripped away.

Obviously, the Green Party, which discontinued its journal, does not think that such language using direct address applies to its supporters, who are assumed to be younger than those of the Social Democrats and Coalition, for example. Bolin's (2014) media generations may have played a role in the Green case. Party supporters seemed to prefer digital media. Consequently, the party discontinued its journal and increased its social media activities, thus keeping the reins of publicity control within the party organisation. However, the discontinued journal was central to the figures who founded the Greens roughly 30 years ago, when the party functioned outside of Parliament. Obviously, a confirmatory source in paper format was required to satisfy older members, so the party created the aforementioned new, glossy magazine. However, the new magazine has ceased practising conventional journalism and focuses more on using marketing tools.

Here, we can find elements that support Pimlott's call to re-establish vanguard media. The Green solution about publishing policies appears consistent, however contradictory the idea first sounds. The Green Party still resembles a movement more than the other Finnish parties in Parliament. The glossy magazine may express vanguard power, reassuring readers that everything is well in the party, led by the very competent people featured in the magazine. It is important to remind supporters about party basics—presented via Green leaders' faces—but the advertising-type approach is also open to new supporters, communicating in language familiar to the young middle class. In this kind of framing, both conventional and vanguard journalism might appear to be too limiting, so marketing language becomes a natural choice.

With the exception of the Greens, the magazine-plus-website framework simply represents an insurance policy to maintain community feeling within the party. This format is a relic, rather than a promise of a platform for debate. Few 'serious' magazines are available in Finland anymore. Consequently, the *feature mix* magazines—particularly those with reasonably high quality—could serve as a discursive strategy to attract outsiders to the marketplace of ideas, creating sites for discussion and participation in the long run. Such a policy could be a marker of alternativeness in Traber's context. A cynic could conclude that the basic interest in involving citizens in discussions and debate appears weak, despite formal declarations claiming the opposite.

Political journalism generally has gone through a series of significant changes. Amid the dramatic emergence of digital communication, it has faced trends such as the acceleration of the news cycle, audience fragmentation and close interactions cultivated by journalists looking for stories and politicians looking for publicity. However, in Finland, the party media long have been onlookers of such processes. Few vanguard attitudes remain, and new pressures have bypassed old party media, which have been kept alive mainly with public support meant to strengthen democracy and citizenry. However, such support today is decreasing, and party organisations have realised that digital media are less costly and more efficient, particularly when under the organisation's control.

Consequently, party media are paralysed more seriously than ever before. Unconsciously and without planning, they have positioned themselves as alternative mainstream publications—but are connected to the mainstream, and they are not disrupting many of its practices, but are actually copying them, particularly in topicality orientation. They operate slightly differently, but do not move too far outside the comfort zone.

In any case, serious political will to involve citizens seems to be missing, and creativity in media action has disappeared. However, '[c]reativity [...] is both paramount and problematic in journalism. It is crucial for journalism with regard to innovation, yet it has always been part and parcel of journalism' (Deuze, 2019). The case of Finnish political magazines exemplifies this dilemma. Changes in publishing and publicity have been planned and carried out with little respect for creativity. Old practices have received only new wrappings.

However, as Deuze pointed out, viewing journalists as powerless individuals surrounded by a hegemonic system full of pressures and constraints does little justice to today's networked and fragmented, but still alert and knowledgeable, professional practitioners of journalism. In the cases studied, the few journalists involved seem to have put the core of communication aside and not deliberately, but implicitly, have accepted the convenient cliché of powerlessness. This is why the result appears as a dead end.