

# The ethics of journalism challenged The blurring boundary between local journalism and communications

**JAANA HUJANEN**  
University of Helsinki

**MIKKO GRÖNLUND**  
University of Turku

**JUHO RUOTSALAINEN**  
University of Turku

**KATJA LEHTISAARI**  
Tampere University

**VILJAMI VAARALA**  
University of Helsinki

## Abstract

The article examines Finnish news professionals' views on the ethical challenges that ensue from emerging and intertwining forms of local professional journalism and communications. Besides describing the current situation, the article employs data from a survey of editors-in-chief to investigate how news professionals anticipate the relationship between journalism and communications evolving in the future. Respondents perceived a blurring of the boundary between local journalism and communications. They observed economic pressures creating incentives for news media to compromise their journalistic ethics and ethical concerns arising from professional communications' adoption of journalistic practices. Editors-in-chief maintained that the boundaries between journalism and other forms of communication are clear in their media but indistinct in other local news media outlets and in society in general. They predicted an ambiguous, even grim, future of local news media in Finland. However, local news media may have a positive future if they become distinct, attractive and relevant again to citizens.

## KEYWORDS

blurring boundaries, boundary work, Finland, futures of journalism, journalism ethics, local media, scenarios

## Introduction

The boundary between local journalism and communications is becoming increasingly blurred (Hagelstein & Zeffass, 2020). In digital media, since all communication takes place through the same medium, the boundaries between different forms of media content have become difficult to maintain (Carlson & Lewis, 2020). Moreover, the influences of communication, public relations (PR), marketing and advertising on journalism are growing as news outlets search for new business models (Ikonen et al., 2017; Macnamara, 2016). As professional journalists are working with fewer resources, they have become more open to content produced outside the newsroom, such as native advertising (Kantola & Lounasmeri, 2014). Consequently, new forms of local journalism, commercial communication, social media practices, algorithmic media logics and public relations are intertwining, combining an array of ideals, practices and characteristics (Jenkins & Graves, 2020). The ethical code of practice regarding hybrids of journalism and other forms of communication remains ambiguous and unstable (e.g. Poutanen et al., 2016). Concurrently, the credibility of the fields of communication and journalism is threatened, for example, via non-transparent native advertising (Macnamara, 2014).

In this article, we examine how media professionals from local news media in Finland perceive the shifting boundary between professional journalism and communications, related ethical concerns and the possible futures of the relationship between the two fields. As the field of communications is varied and new forms of communication continue to emerge, we refer to *communications* foremost as strategic and commercial communications, such as PR, marketing and advertising. The emergence of communications in the journalistic field is of particular interest in Finland, which is considered a Nordic media welfare state where professional journalists have a strong professional ethos and audiences have high trust in the news media (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020; Syvertsen et al., 2014). However, media professionals in Finland have called for a more critical attitude when reporting on economic power holders and private companies (Ala-Fossi et al., 2021). This suggests that ethical and normative concerns touch even relatively healthy news ecosystems.

The reshaping of journalistic means and the ensuing ethical challenges are in their initial stages. To make better sense of actors' expectations for the journalistic field to evolve, this article presents alternative scenarios of the journalism–communications relationship. Thus, it situates among approaches that integrate an

explicit investigation of projected futures in social sciences research, including journalism studies (Ananny & Finn, 2020; Mische, 2009; Urry, 2016). These approaches diverge from futures studies as their research interest concerns present representations of futures rather than possible futures as such (Poli, 2010). Representations of futures matter because they influence people's decisions, from everyday choices to investment decisions, for example (Brown et al., 2000). Thus, we do not purport to anticipate the futures of local journalism but to examine how Finnish journalists make sense of the times to come and participate in debates regarding the present and future boundaries between journalism and communications – debates which influence the changes they pursue in their everyday and strategic work.

## **The context of Finnish local news media**

Local media play a crucial role in helping people feel attached to their communities, providing relevant news and a space for public debate and supplementing the national news agenda of large national newspapers (Hujanen, 2000; Syvertsen et al., 2014). Despite their essential functions, local news media have decreased significantly in Western media systems (Nielsen, 2015). The local news media, which operate on thin margins, are confronted with changing news consumption habits and a shift from print to online news, which reduce the viability of current business models and the desirability of existing products and services (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018).

Finnish local media remain relatively vibrant. Regional newspapers, supplemented by a diverse local press, constitute a cornerstone media in the Finnish news ecosystem. However, Finnish news media companies still significantly depend on advertising revenue from their print editions, which makes them sensitive to the amount and targeting of advertising (Ala-Fossi et al., 2020). Attracting new paying, particularly younger, subscribers has proven challenging (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018) – the Finns are slightly less willing to pay for news compared to many other Western countries (Newman et al., 2020). Though Finland still has a large number of newspapers, titles and circulation have decreased since the early 1990s. Therefore, diversity risks can be seen in people's possibilities to access local news (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018). Simultaneously, new social media groups and hyperlocal initiatives offer online news or content services pertaining to particular communities (Hujanen et al., 2021).

Like other Nordic countries, professional journalists in Finland highly respect ethical standards and codes (Hallin & Mancini, 2004;

Hujanen, 2009; Pöyhtäri et al., 2016). The high modern ideal of autonomy has referred to a dispassionate and impersonal journalist with an outsider, matter-of-fact perspective. Autonomy has presupposed that journalism is independent of economic, political or other influences (Deuze, 2005). Following this, journalists have recognised the importance of being just and independent of outside influences, functioning as gatekeepers of economic and political spheres of influence and citizens (Hujanen, 2016). However, pursuing independent journalism is not necessarily easy. In 2020, the majority (79%) of newspaper editors claimed that they had experienced attempts by politicians, readers or advertisers to influence journalistic content within the last couple of years (Kivioja, 2020).

The ethical guidelines for journalism in Finland place the public first: journalists must be accountable, first and foremost, to their audience – readers, listeners and viewers (Council for Mass Media in Finland [CMM], 2013). The principle of public good has also been central to journalists' professional identity. However, a reinvention of journalistic ideals can be seen in the reimagining of the principle of public service – journalists increasingly understand public service as catering to the needs of their audiences and interacting with them (Pöyhtäri et al., 2016).

## **Blurring boundaries and the projected futures of journalism**

Conceptualisations of the blurring boundaries of journalism situate the shifting relationship between local journalism and communications as part of broader digital media trends. The notion of blurring boundaries has become a pervasive, catch-all diagnosis of the processes of change and transformation in journalism and digital media (Loosen, 2015). Proponents of this notion argue that since anyone, in principle, can participate in the production, interpretation and distribution of news online, the distinction between professional journalism and other forms of content production becomes impossible to maintain (Carlson & Lewis, 2020). The processes of de-boundedness are intensified by journalism's dependence on technology providers as well as commercial pressures which create incentives for journalists to abandon their strict adherence to journalistic norms (Loosen, 2015). Consequently, the boundaries have become blurred within journalism as well: many perceive that digital media have rendered traditional journalistic dichotomies, such as editorial desks vs. marketing departments, obsolete (Chadwick, 2013).

The concept of blurring boundaries implies a relational view and ontology of journalism, where journalism is conceived of as relations between mutually influencing actors, positions and interests, instead of defining essences, such as journalistic norms (Loosen et al., 2022). From a relational perspective, an investigation of the blurring boundaries between journalism, PR and communications sheds light on what journalism is *becoming*, not only on the de-bounding processes as such (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). Since the concept of blurring boundaries denotes ongoing processes of change, it is a temporal term that focuses on forces and trends that are remaking journalism (Carlson & Lewis, 2020). A temporal, future-oriented perspective unveils the normative undertones of the notion of blurring boundaries. It implies a particular future where journalism is a decentralised, distributed and participatory process rather than a distinct institution and profession (Deuze & Witschge, 2020; Starkman, 2011). The seemingly neutral description of journalism's unbounding thus appears as a deeply ethical concern.

Abbott (2001) argues that instead of the boundaries of things, researchers should look for the things of boundaries – the 'things' that draw boundaries between actors and fields. Journalism is distinct from other forms of communication particularly owing to its ethics and related journalistic practices (Singer, 2015). Therefore, one way to examine how the blurring of boundaries between journalism and communications is changing both fields is to investigate how actors in both fields articulate and rearticulate journalistic ethics and norms. In this article, we examine ethical principles and practices as the 'things' of boundaries by probing journalism professionals' views on them in the context of local journalism and communications.

The blurring boundaries and consequent transformations in the practices, ideals, technologies and business models of journalism have made the futures of journalism open and uncertain. The uncertainty and fluidity have increased the demand for trend analyses, predictions and other types of foresight that promise to offer insight into the futures of journalism (Lowrey & Shan, 2018). Journalists themselves, implicitly and explicitly, anticipate what the futures of journalism will be like as they develop new journalistic practices and adapt to the digital media landscape (Franklin, 2014). The increased interest in the futures of journalism raises questions about what future actors will anticipate for journalism, whose interests the anticipated futures serve and how these imaginations and expectations influence current practices (see Poli, 2010). Since journalistic ethics are an essential boundary object of professional journalism, discourses on the futures of journalism fundamentally

concern its ethics. Moreover, journalistic ethics and normative underpinnings are a crucial dimension of journalism's anticipated futures also as imagined futures address different interests and create normative expectations of the times ahead (Brown et al., 2000).

## **Ethical concerns and the blurring of boundaries**

Recent research on journalism ethics shows that ethical challenges connect to the blurring boundaries between (i) journalistic and non-journalistic content within news media and (ii) journalism and advertising from the viewpoint of the casually employed and (iii) the emergence of public organisations claiming to provide news and journalism.

### **i) The blurring boundaries between journalistic and non-journalistic content**

The merging of journalism and communications is perhaps most explicit in native advertising and sponsored content – advertisements or sponsored articles that mimic the style and form of news. These forms of marketing and PR are ethically concerning because they disguise their inherent commercial or otherwise non-public intent (Beckert, 2022). Disguising non-journalistic content as journalism contradicts the ethical norm of news media being transparent about the nature of their content. The production of sponsored content and native advertising requires the input of both marketing and journalism professionals, which erodes the firewall between journalistic work and commercial content. Researchers are concerned about how marketing ventures and corporate profits impact editors' decision-making (Beckert, 2022; Poutanen et al., 2016). A particularly worrying development is the shifting of responsibility for detecting commercial content and associated ethical burdens to audiences. As the ethical codes, regarding sponsored content, is not up to date, the importance of establishing shared ethical guidelines for marketing and journalism has been asserted. (Ikonen et al., 2017; Macnamara, 2014).

Across the domains of communication, advertising and journalism in the United States and Finland, only eight of 40 ethical codes explicitly address sponsored content (Ikonen et al., 2017). The ethical guidelines for Finnish journalists do not include native advertising or sponsored content, although a clarifying statement by the Council for Mass Media in Finland (CMM) acknowledges them. This statement encourages all media to disclose advertorials, advertisements, marketing materials or commercial blogs as 'advertisements' or to indicate that the content was created in a

'commercial collaboration' with an advertiser (CMM, 2015). The guidelines also require journalists and news outlets to make a clear distinction between advertisements and editorial content.

## **ii) Casually employed journalists and advertising**

The economic instability in the media industry has led to greater precarity in the job market, employment insecurity and a growing number of freelancers and casually employed journalists (Gollmitzers, 2021; Mathisen, 2018). Ethical challenges arise as the affiliation between journalism and advertising deepens, both as a consequence of the changing professional roles of news producers these developments bring about and in terms of ensuring continued journalistic autonomy, credibility and transparency. These ethical challenges are particularly highlighted for freelance journalists who also do public relations work. These individuals tend to experience inter-role conflicts when trying to merge conflicting professional norms and ethical codes in their work (Obermaier & Koch, 2014).

## **iii) Public organisations producing quasi-journalistic content**

PR practitioners, such as public organisations, municipalities and cities, have expanded who can claim to produce journalistic content for local audiences (Grafström & Rehnberg, 2019). This development is likely to blur the boundary between journalism and communications because these organisations are not independent of the local administration and public officials. Their emergence has also caused ethical concerns. For example, Swedish local journalists perceive a threat to their profession when municipalities and organisations communicate directly with their audiences (Nygren, 2020). Furthermore, an analysis of digital news sites operated by Swedish county councils has raised concerns about the trustworthiness and credibility of such operations: how strategic communication can be combined with journalistic goals (Grafström & Rehnberg, 2019).

The Finnish ethical guidelines of PR, marketing and advertising underline that professionals must work in accordance with the interests of their employer or client (see e.g. Council of Ethics for Communication, 2015; Finnish Association of Marketing, Technology and Creativity, 2017). The convergence of these fields with journalism creates a substantial ethical conflict where the ambitions of the employer or client and the public service ideal of journalism could be incompatible. In addition, the guidelines applying to strategic communications, PR, advertising and marketing professionals are various and less unified than those for professional journalists, and it is not clear which guidelines

communications professionals should follow owing to the potentially varying job descriptions and positions (Ikonen et al., 2017). In the case of public organisations, several ethical guidelines apply simultaneously, since the professionals must also consider, for instance, the ethical guidelines and laws concerning civil servants.

## **Research questions, data and method**

The article aims at answering the following three research questions: (RQ1) How is the boundary between local journalism and communications perceived to blur and why? (RQ2) What are the ethical challenges and contradictions that emerge from the blurring of boundaries between local journalism and communications? (RQ3) How can the blurring boundaries with communications change local journalism and its ethical-normative stances by 2025? These questions will be answered using data from an online survey of media professionals.

The survey was conducted in December 2020, and invitations to participate were sent to 272 people. The target group was the editors-in-chief of all member publications of News Media Finland (NMF). Editors-in-chief of other non-NMF member publications, including newspapers, free newspapers and hyperlocal media, known to the researchers supplemented the target group. In total, 103 responses were collected (38% response rate). Almost all (95%) respondents were editors-in-chief. A few acted simultaneously as editor-in-chief and CEO. More than half (61%) of the respondents represented paid-for local newspapers, one fifth (18%) free-sheets and city papers and one tenth daily newspapers (12%). Almost half (43%) of the represented publications covered one municipality and one fifth covered two or more municipalities (22%). One fifth (18%) were provincial newspapers.

The survey covered the content, goals and cooperation networks of the respondents' publications, journalists' guidelines and ethical principles, and the relationship and boundaries between journalism and commercial, strategic, social or other forms of communication. The survey comprised Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions (12 in total) and two open-ended questions addressing (i) the emerging ethical conflicts between professional journalism and communications and (ii) how the respondents anticipate the relationship between the two will develop.

The Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions were analysed statistically. Direct quotations from the open-ended questions illustrate the results of the multiple-choice questions, which were



thematically categorised to reveal core conceptions of local media actors in making sense of journalism's relation to communications and its future pathways. The response categories of the second open-ended question were analysed to build scenario outlines of the futures of local journalism and communications in 2025. The outlined alternative futures are scenario sketches rather than proper scenarios because they are based on the survey results and do not include additional information from other sources (see Bell, 2003). The scenario sketches are employed as 'heuristics' that illustrate the respondents' views on the near future of local news in Finland and its relationship with other actors in the field of local media and communications.

## Results

### Analysis of the Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions

To answer RQ1 and RQ2, we first present the results of the Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions using illustrative quotations. Then we proceed to the qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions to answer RQ3.

To serve both residents and advertisers

The content and objectives of the publications were mapped using eight statements (see Figure 1). The views of respondents representing different types of publications did not differ significantly. The publications' most important goals are to serve the residents of the circulation or distribution area as well as advertisers. Nine out of 10 respondents fully agreed that the purpose of their publication is to provide a corporate advertising channel (91%) and to serve local people (89%). Thus, the ideal of public service is being reinvented in a way which enhances the blurring of the boundary between journalism and communications.

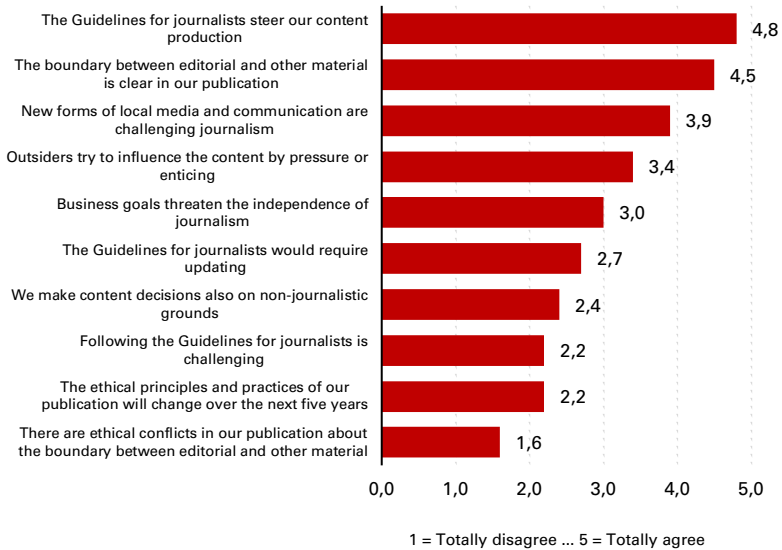


Figure 1: Respondents' views on the guidelines for journalists and ethical principles, average (n = 103).

One explanation for the need to serve the interests of advertisers can be that Finnish newspapers are strongly attached to a business model based on subscription revenue from readers and advertising revenue from advertisers (Picard, 1989). The need to serve advertisers and local businesses likely enhances both the development towards market-oriented local media and news as services to customers and businesses. As the quotation below shows, advertisers are perceived as a key target group alongside readers, who are seen as consumers of local events:

I would not say that there are major contradictions; however, practices have changed over the years. For example, event times and ticket prices were previously clearly excluded from editorial material and were part of the announcement material, but now they are automatically part of the article. (R#71)

#### Critical reporting is not the most important task

Somewhat surprisingly, critical reporting on local decision-making fell short of the goals listed as most important. There were differences by type of publication. Almost all representatives of daily papers fully agreed that critical reporting on local decision-making is important, whereas only half (53%) of the editors-in-chief of free-

sheets and city newspapers fully agreed with this. However, just over one-ninth (11%) of respondents from free city newspapers at least agreed somewhat with this statement.

Critical reporting on local issues did not appear to be as relevant as in previous research on journalists' self-perceptions (Hujanen, 2009). The fact that the business model of free-sheets and city newspapers is based solely on advertising revenue may affect the willingness to report critically on local business and politics. In addition, city papers usually have a small editorial staff and minimal resources to pursue time-consuming information acquisition. The results may also evince the difficulty in obtaining information about issues within municipalities. According to another survey of editors-in-chief, blocking access to information is a problem in some municipalities, and in such cases, decision-makers seek to curb negative news coverage, and all publicity is an abomination to incumbents (Kivioja, 2020). The intensifying effort to curb negative and critical news coverage is a prime example of the heightened need for ethical considerations among local news professionals, as communications professionals play an increasingly central role in the local information environment.

'We don't know if the guidelines for journalists should be updated'

Questions around ethics in journalism are topical but problematic for Finnish local media professionals. Almost half (44%) of the respondents were unsure of whether the guidelines for journalists, a central element of journalism's boundaries, need updating. This may indicate the experience of a growing mismatch between the guidelines and practical work but unawareness of how the guidelines should be changed. Nonetheless, most respondents perceived it as easy for journalists to follow instructions. Less than one fifth (16%) found it at least somewhat challenging. Respondents perceived following these guidelines to be slightly more challenging at community and district newspapers than at other publications.

Same field and similar content but different rules

The majority (87%) of respondents felt that journalism and other communications work in the same field but with different rules. This presents a clear sign of the blurring of boundaries between journalism and communications as well as an ethical challenge. Respondents described that the content produced by non-journalistic actors and communities can be similar to journalistic products without being journalism. Respondents also indicated that the motives of the background community are not clearly stated when these communities produce news-like content. A major ethical consequence of the ongoing process is the perceived

confusion in society about what is and is not journalism. According to respondents, the boundary between journalism and other communications is far from clear for audiences, officials, policymakers or business representatives. Of note, 'the demarcation between journalism and other material is seen as unclear in general in society and media but not in their own media'. According to the majority of respondents (95%), the demarcation between journalistic and other material is unclear in local news media in general:

Many media outlets have started to blur the distinction between journalism and marketing. This puts pressure on us too. (R#32)

'There are ethical problems but not in our media'

Besides seeing a problematic blurring of the boundaries of journalism outside their own media, respondents recognised ethical challenges. They positioned them outside their own media and expressed confidence about their own professionalism, expertise and adherence to ethical principles. The majority (91%) saw no ethical conflicts between the editorial and other material in their own publication. Some did not even see 'any kind of relationship' between journalistic and non-journalistic content. They referred to different but undefined 'goals' and 'points of view' which steer the making of journalism and communication:

Journalism is made from its own point of view, communication from its own. (R#59)

Journalism has its own goals and communication has its own goals. There will be no contradictions when this is acknowledged and the editorial staff follow their journalistic goals. (R#7)

New forms of municipal communication are enhancing the blurring of boundaries

Regarding the blurring of boundaries, new forms of local media and communications that employ journalistic genres and styles are perceived to play a central role (see Figure 2). Our data indicate that genres and styles of professional journalism work as essential 'things' of journalistic boundaries. According to four out of five (81%) respondents, new forms of local communication, often similar to journalism, challenge traditional journalism and cause an ethical dilemma. Only one in seven (15%) respondents disagreed with this. As the quotations below illustrate, municipalities that communicate via their own website or social media sites are seen to

enhance the blurring of the boundary between journalism and strategic communications:

Social media, where municipalities are also making an effort, is blurring the line between journalism and marketing communications. (R#30)

Municipalities have taken a more prominent role in communication and produce similar content with the media. (R#103)

More than half (59%) of the respondents also stated that content produced by communications and marketing agencies as well as citizen journalists and activists weakens the position of professional journalism. Therefore, they perceived the transformation within local media both as a question of the boundaries of journalism and of the future position of local media in society.

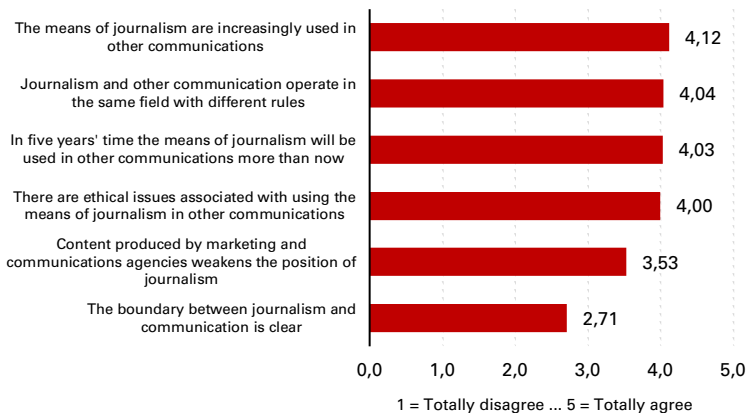


Figure 2: Respondents' views on the boundary between journalism and communications, average (n = 103).

Pressure from outside the newsroom is felt within the newsroom as an ethical concern

Our results further suggest that the ideal of autonomy is being challenged in a profound way by forces outside the newsroom and media. Two thirds (63%) of respondents viewed external pressure or temptation as influencing the content of the publication they represent. Significantly fewer (26%) respondents stated that there is no such effect. The open answers indicate that externally, politicians, companies, organisations and opinion leaders try to influence content on a daily basis.

Business motives from inside are also felt as an ethical concern

Almost half (42%) of the respondents perceived that the business objectives of their background company threaten the journalistic independence of their publication. Within local media, there seems to be more pressure than in newspapers in general. In 2020, an NMF survey mapped attempts to exert an influence perceived as pressure or bribery. In the present study, one fifth (17%) of the editors-in-chief of newspapers and city newspapers had experienced their company's management seeking to influence the newspaper's content (Kivioja, 2020).

Problems with the business model enhance the blurring of boundaries

The results further indicate that changes in the business environment challenge the news media's traditional two-revenue stream business model. The long-lasting decline of print media in the market seems to continue increasing the financial pressure on local news media as well. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic caused an additional significant decrease in advertising revenue, posing severe challenges for local news media. The drop in advertising was especially challenging for free-sheets and city newspapers that are completely dependent on advertising revenue. The quotations below illustrate that the problems related to both Covid-19 and the traditional business model were thought to enhance the blurring of boundaries between journalism, commercialism and marketing. The ethical problem which arises is that content, such as marketing material, is presented as journalism although it does not follow the ethical guidelines of news making:

The borderline between journalism and commercialism is blurring even more. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased pressure from the publisher. (R#46)

The decline in advertising has weakened the funding base of journalism. The risk is that more pre-produced information and marketing material will be published in the name of journalism. (R#61)

A contradiction between the ethical principles of journalists and communications professionals

More than half (58%) of the respondents conveyed that the ethical principles of journalists and communications professionals are contradictory. Thus, our study indicates that ethical principles function as central 'things' of boundaries of journalism and other forms of communications. One third (31%) of respondents did not

want to comment on this issue. Perhaps these respondents did not have a clear idea of the differences and possible contradictions between the ethical principles of the groups. Non-response may also indicate a transition between journalism and communication; that is, ethical principles and practices are taking shape and respondents were unable or unwilling to take a stance. Less than half (42%) of respondents could not say whether there is a conflict between journalists and communications professionals, while more than one third (39%) perceived a conflict between the ethical principles of these occupational groups.

### **Analysis of the open-ended questions: a conflicted future for journalism and communication?**

The first open-ended question enquired about ethical conflicts the respondents saw emerging between journalism and communications (RQ2). According to the responses, the most ethically worrying trend is 'the use of journalistic practices and styles in PR and other forms of commercial or strategic communications' (21 responses). Such content resembles journalism but does not follow basic journalistic norms, such as critical reflection and reliance on facts. This type of media content was viewed as ethically questionable for concealing the commercial and strategic interests it advances while appearing to serve the public good. Such content can also create pressure for journalists to cover issues in a positive light and emphasise emotions rather than facts in their news delivery. One respondent even likened communications to 'fake news' that uses information delivery as a smokescreen to pursue a hidden agenda:

Communications is a 'fake news medium'. They appear impartial but pursue the background organisation's own cause, e.g. companies, communities and municipalities. (R#83)

Respondents also highlighted the increased quality and professionalisation of communications as a source of ethical conflicts. The more professional and trustworthy commercial and strategic content appears, the easier it becomes to promote private interests. The professionalisation of communications has created incentives for local newsrooms to publish PR content as news, often without any or only slight editing by journalists (see also Barnoy, 2021):

Communications have clearly become more professional, and press releases increasingly remind one of finished newspaper articles. Our own

publication does not publish press releases without editing, but many other media do. (R#77)

The reductions in editorial staff create an incentive to use so-called ready-made PR materials that come from both the private and public sectors. (R#91)

The second response category shows an ethically worrying trend of citizens', firms' and public officials' difficulties in deciphering between journalism and communications (14 responses). According to respondents, this is particularly due to increases in professionally produced PR content, such as blogs. Part of the professionalisation is the production of news-like content by various actors who do not adhere to journalistic norms:

It is infuriating when I ask for an interview with local officials, [...] concerning a property sale, for instance, and they respond that their marketing department will send a ready-made article on the topic. It is frustrating to explain time and again why we won't publish the offered article as such. People have become astonishingly ignorant in this respect [telling the difference between journalism and other content]. (R#30)

Respondents divulged that they foresee a risk of journalism becoming content just like any other in the eyes of the public. Consequently, journalistic criticality may appear as an annoyance rather than an important ethical principle. This can further undermine journalism's legitimacy and authority:

Municipalities have their own communication strategies and they seek to get that through in the media. Local officials and politicians have an attitude that the local or regional newspapers should support the municipality's communication strategy. (R#36)

The above three categories describe trends that will continue and potentially strengthen in the future. They shed light on the 'futures knowledge' upon which local news media actors make sense of their potential futures and which influences their decision-making and strategic planning (Poureu et al., 2019). The emerging dynamics seem rather grim: while the economic sustainability of local news media deteriorates, communications become professionalised and of increasingly high quality. Consequently, three patterns emerge: (i) news media are inclined to publish PR materials without or with only slight editing, (ii) content producers are able to produce material that resembles professional journalism and (iii) the public



finds it increasingly difficult to differentiate the two. These patterns create an ethical dilemma, as communications thrive by exploiting professional journalism while the democratic function of news media deteriorates as a consequence. These dynamics, and their alternatives, are elaborated and explored further in the following scenario sketches.

## **Future of local news media and journalism: three scenario sketches**

To answer RQ3 on possible futures, the responses to the second open-ended question were grouped thematically, resulting in three categories and corresponding scenario sketches written by the authors. The scenario sketches outline possible directions in which the relationship between professional journalism and communications could evolve by 2025 and illuminate how news media actors make sense of the possible futures and act accordingly in the present.

### **Scenario sketch 1: Journalism on the sidelines**

By 2025, well-resourced PR and communications firms have become central in local media ecosystems. Yet the local news media have been unable to find a sustainable business model. With diminished resources, local journalism continues to lose its relevance. The news media are still tethered to print, whereas communications businesses operate mostly online. This gives non-journalistic content producers an upper hand, as online media are often more attractive to advertisers and audiences. The ageing population adds to news media's financial conundrums, as new generations rarely pay for local news. Many of the surviving local news organisations supplement the deteriorated news production with native advertising. Consequently, the news media organisations end up supporting their non-journalistic competitors.

It is common for municipalities, associations, schools, healthcare providers and other local institutions to buy services from PR and communications firms or have their own highly professional communications departments. The content they produce often mimics journalism but lacks its criticality of those in power. Public actors increasingly communicate directly to their audiences on social media. Consequently, communications have become communal and intimate. Detached and critical journalism often seems out of place in this kind of media landscape.

The scenario also highlights the importance of news' financial sustainability for journalistic ethics. The more dire a news outlet's

financial situation, the more tempted it will be to compromise journalistic ethics by, for instance, publishing native advertising without sufficient measures to keep the editorial and business desks separate. However, the scenario also underlines the role of audience-centric approaches for the news media. Competition for audiences' interest and attention will likely continue to increase, thus making the need for ethical considerations ever more urgent.

#### Scenario sketch 2: Different fields, different rules

In 2025, both local journalism and local communications are thriving, since they both have found their own niche in the local media ecology. Communications produce cheerful and entertaining content, while local news media have doubled down on their core functions, such as investigative reporting. The news media's sharpened focus has contributed to a significant growth in news subscriptions, which has enabled editorial independence.

Local citizens have realised that professional news media often give them a fuller, wider and more measured picture than other local information providers do. It is widely acknowledged that someone has to tell the local public about unpleasant issues, such as child custody issues or the closing down of nursing homes. The news media also excel at following long-term trends and providing background information on local issues. Besides the back-to-basics approach of local news media, their newfound success owes to their new, audience-centric practices. The local news media are constantly developing new ways to appear interesting to audiences. Central to these practices is an emphasis on local and hyperlocal issues and cooperation with local communities.

The futures of journalism are often described as journalism's expansion beyond 'mere' reporting and news analysis (Nielsen, 2017). From an ethical viewpoint, the scenario maintains an opposite strategy of narrowing down to journalism's core functions. Focusing on 'hard news', according to the respondents, would make it easier to guard the ethical boundaries of journalism. The scenario also suggests focusing on hyperlocality and local communities as an ethically sustainable strategy to cater to audience needs.

#### Scenario sketch 3: Everything is just content

By 2025, the content economy has soared due to strong demand from businesses and consumers alike. These new revenue streams have proved irresistible to news media. Local journalism has found financial sustainability by embracing the styles and practices of commercial communications. The boundary between professional journalism and communications has all but disappeared, and local

news media are disincentivised to adhere to journalistic norms and practices. Nonetheless, journalism still has authority and trustworthiness. Local news media offer a premium channel for organisations and other actors seeking to stand out in the masses of content. Collaborations with news media often result in high-quality content that addresses serious issues that are significant to the local public.

This scenario raises the ethically worrisome but very real possibility that financial pressures, competition for attention on social media platforms and audience demand will erase the boundary between journalism and communications altogether. However, the scenario maintains that in this context, an ethically sound approach for news media is to focus on top-tier content that addresses issues of public importance.

## Discussion

This article has examined the blurring of boundaries between local journalism and communications. We have conceptualised ethics as a central element of boundary work (Singer, 2015) and approached the unbounding of journalism as an ethical concern. The article sought to answer the research questions on how and why the boundary between local journalism and communications is perceived to be blurring, what ethical challenges emerge from this and how the blurring of boundaries can change local journalism and its ethical-normative stances by 2025. The questions have been answered by using survey data gathered from Finnish news media professionals.

The study reveals that within professional journalism, the boundaries between journalism and communications are allegedly eroded by a growing neglect of critical reporting. This is connected to problems with business models and a strengthened desire to serve advertisers. Extrinsic forces, in turn, produce new actors who produce content similar to journalism but do not adhere to its rules and pressures from other actors, such as advertisers or politicians, about what should be reported and how. Compared to previous research on journalists' self-perceptions, the role of advertisers seems to have become increasingly important (Hujanen, 2009, 2016; Pöyhkäri et al., 2016).

According to the study, the blurring of boundaries between journalism and communications has at least three fundamental implications. First, the public cannot differentiate between journalism and other forms of media content as well as their ethical underpinnings. Second, the blurring of boundaries may indicate

that providing readers with market- and community-oriented services is growing in importance compared to the more traditional civic duty of news media. Third, the existing ethical guidelines for journalism or communications cannot fully address or solve ethical dilemmas that emerge in this context. Most respondents felt that journalism and other communications work in the same field but with different rules, and more than half perceived a contradiction between the ethical principles of journalists and communications professionals. From this perspective, establishing shared ethical guidelines for marketing and journalism would be important (see Ikonen et al., 2017; Macnamara, 2014). When the ethical code of practice is understood as one of the most fundamental ‘things’ and a cornerstone of the boundaries of journalism (see Abbott, 2001), it is noteworthy that almost half the respondents were unsure about whether the guidelines for professional journalists should be updated. This implies that it is unclear for many within the journalism profession how the code of ethics should be approached – and what the boundaries of journalism are.

Our study supports many of the observations regarding the concerns around journalism ethics (see Beckert, 2022; Poutanen et al., 2016). Respondents saw a dual ‘crisis’ that threatens to undermine the ethical integrity of local journalism. First, the dire economic prospects of many local media outlets create pressures to adopt practices that are ethically ambiguous, such as publishing PR materials without editing them. Second, increasingly professionalised and well-resourced communications were seen to produce high-quality content that competes with journalistic content and problematically borrows from journalistic styles without the critical mindset of professional journalists. Consequently, the boundary between journalism and other communications has become far from clear for audiences, officials, policymakers or business representatives. Companies and municipalities communicate to the public and disseminate their messages through different media according to their communication strategies. Likewise, for instance, in Sweden (Grafström & Rehnberg, 2019), confusion is seen as becoming more severe as local communications, particularly those of municipalities, become more professional and increasingly borrow from journalism.

The survey respondents anticipated the relationship between local journalism and communications evolving along three alternative scenario outlines. In the first scenario outline, ‘Journalism on the sidelines’, local journalism continues to wither due to the eroding business models and intense competition from

other local media producers. In the second scenario outline, 'Different fields, different rules', local journalism and communications diverge and find their own niches in the local news ecology. In the third scenario outline, 'Everything is just content', local journalism finds financial sustainability by embracing the practices of commercial communications. These scenarios do not necessarily predict the future but, rather, shed light on *expectations* (Brown et al., 2000) that local news media have of their futures. Such expectations influence strategic decision-making and resource allocation, and thus influence how the future eventually unfolds.

The scenarios remind us that the economic and cultural collapse of professional local news media, and their consequent replacement by other quasi-journalistic local media producers, is serious and plausible. The scenarios highlight three trends contributing to the erosion of journalistic ethics and boundaries: news outlets' financial challenges, competition for attention on social and other digital media and audiences' indifference to professional journalism. The scenarios suggest two strategies to avert an ethical crisis in journalism. The first is to double down on the core functions of news journalism to make it more distinct from other local news content. The renewed focus on 'hard news' can be paired with making journalism attractive for audiences by focusing on (hyper)local issues and cooperating with local communities. Moving in the opposite direction, the second strategy is that the news media abandon journalistic norms and opportunistically produce content that attracts audiences while employing their prestige and authority to charge premium prices. In this future, journalism can rebuild its ethics by focusing on 'serious' issues that serve the public despite being paid for by third parties.

The results indicate that providing local news users with market-oriented services is gaining importance among local news media. New forms of local news content seem to strive for a more positive and cheerful approach to cities and communities. How this re-engagement with local audiences is carried out is among the fundamental questions and uncertainties of the local news media. One possibility is that the critical civic duty of news media is left to 'others', but it remains unclear who these critical media actors are.

The study shows overall trends in news practitioners' views regarding ethical challenges and future perspectives, but it has its limitations. More nuanced insight into the blurring boundaries between professional journalism and communications calls for a qualitative research design. Thematic interviews with media professionals would deepen our understanding of practitioners' views and sense-making on the issue. Qualitative text analysis could shed more light on how the ethical contradictions are visible in the

media content. It is also evident that operating in the same field with different rules has caused ethical dilemmas that would require critical discussion about ethical guidelines for journalism and communications.

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**JAANA HUJANEN**

Professor  
Swedish School of Social Science  
University of Helsinki  
jaana.hujanen@helsinki.fi

**MIKKO GRÖNLUND**

Research Manager  
Brahea Centre  
University of Turku  
mikko.s.gronlund@utu.fi

**JUHO RUOTSALAINEN**

PhD fellow  
Finland Futures Research Centre  
University of Turku  
juho.ruotsalainen@utu.fi

**KATJA LEHTISAARI**

Senior Lecturer  
Faculty of Information Technology  
and Communication Sciences  
Tampere University  
katja.lehtisaari@tuni.fi

**VILJAMI VAARALA**

PhD fellow  
Swedish School of Social Science  
University of Helsinki  
viljami.vaarala@helsinki.fi