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# Performing journalism. Making sense of ethical practice within local interloper media

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## Abstract

This paper explores the blurring boundaries between local journalism, strategic and marketing communications and civic information. The study at hand produces new knowledge regarding the conceptions and practices that are emerging in the middle ground between local journalism and communications. The data consist of 10 thematic in-depth interviews with writers, owners and other key personnel from Finnish local communications operations applying journalistic practices in their content production, conceptualised here as interloper media practitioners. By applying the concept of boundary work, the study sheds light on the discursive contest over the forms and vocabulary of journalism and news media. The study also explores the ethical guidelines interloper media apply and how their representatives reflect on their ethical code of practice. The results are condensed into five rationales the practitioners use to justify the legitimacy of the interloper media outlets and the use of journalistic methods in strategic

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or commercial communications and civic information. The practitioners experience the boundaries between journalism and various types of communications as blurring. They borrow and apply journalistic styles and ethical guidelines selectively to lend their media attractivity and credibility. They face ethical conflicts in their work particularly regarding their relationship to power holders and decision-makers. Yet a culture of profound ethical reflection is markedly absent from their accounts.

**Keywords**
Boundaries, interlopers, local journalism, communications, media

## Introduction

The transition to digital media has urged journalism studies to theorise journalism beyond its traditional institutions and boundaries (Broersma and Peters, 2013; Steensen and Ahva, 2015). Profound technological developments and the proliferation of new content producers have complicated separating journalism from other media content in the current multi-directional hybrid media environment (e.g. Carlson, 2017; Eldridge, 2018). Consequently, there is a lack of consensus among scholars and journalists on who is a journalist and what constitutes journalism (Black, 2010; Meyers et al., 2012). Reflecting similar approaches in social sciences (Emirbayer, 1997), many journalism scholars conceive of journalism not as a stable object but as a constellation of dynamic processes that are constantly changing in unfolding relations between actors, such as social media companies or audience communities (Deuze and Witschge, 2020).

The boundaries of journalism, as in any profession, are drawn by discourses of inclusion and exclusion (Carlson and Lewis, 2015). Journalists engaging in such boundary work seek to preserve journalism's assumed 'core' to remain distinct from other information producers (Eldridge, 2019). Therefore, journalistic norms and practices attract intense interest (Reese, 2021). Journalists draw on these to assert their legitimacy and authority, and actors outside conventional professional journalism borrow from journalism either to collaborate with journalists or to appear as high-quality media.

This paper explores the blurring boundaries between local journalism, civic information and strategic or marketing communications from the viewpoint of interloper media. Civic information is defined as media content that helps its consumers participate in political, social and cultural life (Li, 2019). Strategic communication has traditionally been identified as organisations' purposeful use of communication to fulfil their mission (Hallahan et al., 2007; Thomas and Stephens, 2014). With the rise of digital and social media, definitions emphasise the creation of shared meanings rather than one-directional transmission of information strategically central to an organisation (Thomas and Stephens, 2014; Zerfass et al., 2018). In this context, communicators' efforts at producing relevant, interesting and trustworthy content by borrowing journalistic ideals and practices appears to aim at creating shared meanings with their audiences. This study produces new knowledge regarding the conceptions and practices emerging in the middle

ground between local journalism and other forms of communication. The focus is on how Finnish local interloper media practitioners (Eldridge, 2019; Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018) make sense of their work practice and its ethical principles. In the study, local interloper media are situated between news media and communications, combining characteristics from both fields.

## Theory and literature

Like many recent inquiries seeking to accommodate both change and stability in the study of contemporary journalism, this study draws from *field theory* to examine the evolving relationship between commercial and strategic communications and local news media (Lowrey and Sherill, 2020). According to field theory, society consists of differentiated fields: specialised and semi-autonomous spheres of action that are bound together by a field's 'rules of the game' (Benson and Neveu, 2005). A field structures action by assigning actors to pre-established positions and enforcing on them its *doxa* – core norms, ethics, and presuppositions that are often tacit or perceived as self-evident (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The doxa shapes actors' *habitus* – practices and external markers that express the norms and values of a field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). The stylistic conventions of journalistic texts, for instance, are part of journalists' habitus and materialise the underlying journalistic doxa.

Fields are both sustained and dynamic structures which actors seek to either preserve or transform (Benson and Neveu, 2005). Fields are characterised by power struggles over their doxa and boundaries within and between them. These struggles are influenced by and fought over the *economic*, *cultural* and *social capital* within a field (Benson, 1999). New entrants to a field, such as interloper actors, often perform as change agents seeking to transform the field by employing their forms of capital (Eldridge, 2019).

In this study, the concept of interloper media denotes a group of actors who operate on the boundaries of the journalistic field. Interlopers assert their belonging to the journalistic field and challenge its primacy as a provider of legitimate information and in-group/out-group dynamics (Eldridge, 2014). The *interloper* concept has been applied to 'strangers' in the journalistic field, such as amateur journalists, bloggers, programmers and web analytics managers – actors who impact journalism without fitting into traditional news production (Eldridge, 2019; Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018). This study examines a process whereby interlopers from the field of strategic and marketing communications undertake reverse boundary work in relation to journalism – that is, they seek to expand to the journalistic field and exploit its cultural capital, including the journalistic norms and practices that grant content credibility and trustworthiness. Thereby, they blur the boundaries between journalism and communications and potentially generate changes in both fields (Carlson and Lewis, 2020).

Eldridge (2019: 8) defines interloper media as media that 'claim to belong to the journalistic field while also openly criticising traditional media and journalists they associate with institutions of power'. Holton and Belair-Gagnon (2018) divide these strangers into *explicit interlopers*, *implicit interlopers* and *intralopers*. *Implicit interlopers* are generally programmers or web analytics professionals who assist journalists

with data. Their contributions may shift the focus from serving the public interest to highlighting user behaviour and marketing outcomes. *Intralopers* are non-traditional journalism actors, such as internal programmers and digitally savvy professionals, who work within news organisations, bringing 'external' expertise to news production.

The local initiatives examined in this study represent *explicit interlopers* – that is, 'non-traditional media actors who may not necessarily be welcomed or defined as journalists or media actors and who work on the periphery of the profession while directly contributing content or products to the creation or distribution of news' (Holton and Belair-Gagnon, 2018: 73). The investigated actors represent explicit interlopers because they are non-traditional media or journalism actors, but they create local information and news. Sometimes, the content they produce resembles journalism. However, their content cannot be labelled as professional journalism since the practitioners do not systematically adhere to journalistic practices and ethical principles.

Journalistic ideology – here understood as the ethical principles to which journalists adhere – plays a crucial role in (re)constructing the boundary that separates professional journalism from other fields of media production (Carlson and Lewis, 2020). Ethical principles also *connect* professional journalism with actors beyond its conventional boundaries. It is journalistic norms and values around which actors, such as fact-checkers, data scientists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), coalesce to collaborate with journalists (Reese, 2021). Thus, an investigation of journalism's shifting boundaries necessitates attention to journalistic norms. The norms of public service and autonomy are of interest here (see Deuze, 2005). The journalistic ideal of autonomy has traditionally emphasised the importance of journalism's independence of political, economic or other interests, and the ideal of the autonomous journalist has been envisioned as an impersonal and dispassionate actor who adopts an outsider perspective and a matter-of-fact way of reporting (Deuze, 2005). However, the ideal of autonomy has become increasingly problematised in the digital media landscape. In the pre-digital mass media, the idealised journalist preserved their autonomy by reporting on topics that they and their colleagues deemed newsworthy according to news criterion (Nelson, 2018). Now that advertising funding is being replaced with foundation funding, subscriptions and other forms of audience payments, journalists are increasingly tailoring content to suit the needs of their funders, which can be perceived as a threat to autonomy (Benson, 2019). Moreover, as digital technologies have enabled audiences and other non-journalistic actors to become active news users instead of mere receivers of information, journalistic autonomy is being challenged and redefined from outside the journalistic field (Heft and Dogruel, 2019).

The conventional notions of journalistic autonomy emphasise impersonality in the name of public service. The norm of public service has typically referred both to an understanding that journalists work for the public, performing the role of watchdog in the service of the people (Deuze, 2005), and the idea that journalists are accountable, above all, to their audiences (Council for Mass Media [CMM], 2014). Yet emerging norms underline a more individualised notion of autonomy that emphasises self-expressive and creative approaches to journalism (Harte et al., 2016). To appear distinctive, interloper media may increasingly develop unique approaches to journalism that attract their own audience segment (see Nelson, 2018). The contradiction between serving the general

public and specific audiences applies to interloper media as it does to any contemporary news media operation.

Ethical codes consolidate the regulative and constitutive rules of journalism (Ryfe, 2006). They function as a strong collective frame for journalism, its role in democracy and how it remains accountable to the public. Ethical standards emphasise both legitimate modes of journalistic practice and attitudes and assumptions concerning what journalism ought to be. Codes of ethics serve as points of reference in debates about professional practice, institutional autonomy and legitimacy (Ward, 2019), and consequently in defining what can and cannot be conceptualised as journalism (Carlson and Lewis, 2015; Hafez, 2002). Interloper media practitioners, being in-betweeners, rearticulate journalistic ethics. Of particular interest here is the opposition between an impersonal service for the general public and more individualised notions of journalistic ethics, since these are part of the core discussions where the boundaries of journalism are being redrawn within and outside the journalistic field (Nelson, 2018).

The blurring boundaries between journalism and other forms of media content have been prominent in sponsored content and native advertising, where a company 'borrows' the trustworthiness of news to advertise its product or service (Balint, 2021; Ferrer Conill, 2016). Native advertising is among the sites where the boundaries between journalism's public and more private roles are negotiated. Native advertisements tend to perform a service role, such as providing practical advice to audiences, but may also serve a civic role, such as supporting public participation (Li, 2019). Recent hybrid media forms that blend service and civic roles include media initiatives by public sector organisations (Grafström and Rehnberg, 2019). In the case of local 'media' launched by public organisations, several ethical guidelines apply – codes of journalism and/or communications and guidelines and laws concerning civil servants. Guidelines applying to communications, public relations (PRs), advertising and marketing professionals are more varied and less unified than those for professional journalists, and they reflect varying strategic goals and values.

Implementing ethical codes in any profession can enhance the legitimacy and ethical conduct of the discipline, yet the guidelines for persuasive communication professions differ from those of journalists. The Finnish Association of Communication Professionals (ProCom) states in its code of ethics that a communications professional acts in accordance with the interests of an employer or client. The greater diversity of ethical guidelines within persuasive communication professions, thus, might reflect the greater variance in lines of work and clients that this profession serves (Ikonen et al., 2017).

This study examines the boundaries of journalism and commercial/strategic communications to answer two research questions:

**RQ1.** How do the local interloper media practitioners perceive the boundary between journalism and commercial or strategic communications in their work?

**RQ2.** How do the practitioners make sense of the ethics they apply to their work and how do they explain their handling of possible ethical conflicts?

## Context

Regional and local news media play an important role in the Finnish media ecosystem. However, over the past 20 years, this ecosystem has experienced structural deformation and transformation. As of 2020, the number of paid-for non-daily newspaper titles had fallen from 158 to 137 (−13%). The presence of Finnish legacy media has begun to diminish locally, and new diversity risks can be seen regarding people's possibilities for accessing local news (Ala-Fossi et al., 2018). According to McQuail and Van Cuilenburg (1983), diversity refers to the heterogeneity of media content based on one or more criterion. Van der Wurff (2005) states that media content provided by a market can be seen as diverse when the outlets themselves are internally diverse or they provide different types of content that create a diverse supply.

In Finland, continued concentration and consolidation of the news media market has led to a stronger market position for the largest newspaper groups. To increase efficiency and profitability, publishers have grouped local titles and centralised back office functions, like advertising sales. Local and regional newspapers belonging to the same company cross-publish each other's materials, making their content less original and more distant from the local community. In 2021, the share of the largest news media company was almost a third (31%) of all member publications (232 titles) of News Media Finland (NMF). Altogether, the five largest media concerns own more than half (59%) and the 10 biggest companies own two-thirds (71%) of all NMF member titles. Therefore, both paid-for newspapers and free city papers in many locations belong to the same group of companies.

Simultaneously, new local media have emerged, including social media groups and hyperlocal initiatives that offer an online news, communication or content service pertaining to a small community, such as a village or neighbourhood (Grönlund et al., 2021). Their content includes stories that would not be regarded as news or as newsworthy in traditional local media. Diversity in local and regional newspapers is important for scattered populations; it helps to secure public debate in smaller communities and reinforce local identity and settlement patterns. Local publications also help people feel attached to their local community, providing a relevant source of information and space for debate and supplementing the national news arena sustained by national and regional newspapers (Hujanen et al., 2019; Syvertsen et al., 2014).

## Method

The data consist of semi-structured interviews with 10 practitioners from Finnish local interloper media. Six interviewees have worked as journalists and four of them still identify as journalists. Four have no previous experience in journalism or communications. In contrast, four interviewees have an educational background in journalism or communications and have worked exclusively in journalism or communications professions. One interview was done with two interviewees from the same outlet, while the others were one-to-one, resulting in nine anonymised interviews. The interviewees were contacted by email, and the interviews were held remotely through video calls between

March and August 2021. The interviews lasted 40–98 min and were recorded with the interviewees' consent. The interviewees represent seven interloper media outlets. They are situated outside the professional news media but produce local information and news. The data represent media outlets financed and produced by a municipality or a city; media outlets fully or partly funded by a municipality, city or parish but produced by a self-reliant community or company; commercial media outlets; and a social media influencer.

The reason for including such diverse media initiatives in the analysis lies in the observation that new types of professionals identifying themselves as journalists are emerging in the Finnish local communications field. They apply journalistic norms and methods to their strategic communications, commercial communications and civic information. Therefore, instead of concentrating on one actor group, we found it fruitful to examine local interlopers widely. Furthermore, as the fields are still emerging and the number of actors is limited, one set of actors would have provided too small a data set. Some actors who do not identify as journalists or have experience in journalism were also included because they purport to offer news and/or journalism.

The media outlets – pseudonymised as *Town Media*, *City Media*, *Locally Now*, *Local Route*, *Town News*, *Local Resident* and *My Talk* – apply or mimic journalistic methods, but none are members of NMF nor the CMM in Finland. Belonging to the CMM and being obligated to follow its guidelines is essential for a Finnish publication to be accepted as 'journalism'; it signifies that the publication is designed as an ethical journalistic organisation. Three of the media outlets were founded in the 2020s, two in the 2010s and the remaining two are older. Geographically, they are distributed throughout Finland – three in the South, two in the North, one in the West and one in the central part of the country. They operate in different types of media environments: three are published in rural areas and four in bigger or medium-sized cities, where the range of local media is more diverse.

Two outlets are funded entirely by the city as part of its communications budget and their editors-in-chief also serve as the city's directors of communications. One outlet is co-financed and co-published by the municipality and the parish, gathering additional funding via advertisements for local businesses. The editorial work is outsourced to a communications agency organised as a sole proprietorship. One outlet is funded by dozens of local businesses via an association. In two cases, the publisher is a small limited liability company with business objectives. The first outlet is funded through advertising, while the other's business model is based on commercial cooperation in the form of native advertisements. One initiative represents a commercial collaboration between a municipality and a social media influencer.

The interviewees' job descriptions are diverse: editor-in-chief, social media influencer, journalist/reporter, municipal manager, chief communications officer, founder and owner of a media outlet, marketing secretary and production coordinator. The interviewees with professional experience in journalism have worked as journalists and editors-in-chief, for instance, for the public broadcaster, at newspapers or at a congregational or party paper – all of which officially adhere to the CMM's journalistic guidelines. The other fields in which they have experience are agriculture and forestry, marketing, financing, local administration and church.

The interview method aimed at obtaining answers reflecting the interviewees' thoughts on selected topics. The interviewees were asked what professional group they feel they belong to and what ethical guidelines or ideals they follow. They were also asked if they have faced any ethical problems or conflicts in their work; whether the content of the publication can be perceived as journalism or not and why; what journalistic methods they apply and why; how they perceive the distinction between journalistic and non-journalistic content; and whether they consider the distinction to be clear for the reader. They were also asked about how they have resolved ethical problems. Regarding autonomy, the interviewees were asked if and how they have been pressured to publish or write about something they did not feel was appropriate to publish.

The transcribed interviews were analysed paragraph by paragraph through thematic and open coding in ATLAS.ti. Thematic coding is useful for identifying key features, differences and similarities in a large data set (Boeije, 2010; Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic codes were created beforehand according to the themes of this study. They were given labels, such as 'ethical codes of practice', 'ethical ideals', 'views on the boundaries between journalism and other forms of communication', 'views on journalism' and 'views on marketing'. Open coding was used to identify other possible themes linked to the topic that were not included in the original thematic coding. The codes were created by reading through the interviews and identifying similar themes in the interviewees' answers. We present our main observations in the form of rationales – a set of arguments and reasonings constructed in interviewees' talk to position their media and practices in relation to professional journalism and its code of ethics. In this sense, the rationales illustrate how interloper practitioners engage in boundary work. In highlighting different perspectives on the same phenomenon (i.e. boundary work), they partially overlap.

## Results

Within the rationale of (i) *'We are not quite making journalism, but we borrow its practices and vocabulary'*, interloper media, their practices and content are portrayed as something not quite journalism but close to it. Within this rationale, the practitioners exploit the cultural capital of the journalistic field by saying they make their content *appear* as almost journalism – mimicking journalistic habitus. The rationale is characterised by the strategic and ambiguous use of journalistic vocabulary and forms with those of communications. The rationale exploits the fact that there is no joint understanding of the demarcation between journalistic and non-journalistic media, content or genres. Some interloper media included in the study call themselves 'city media' or 'identity media' that produce 'service journalism' or 'news'. An interviewee mentioned that the city-operated outlet is 'playing' with the idea of journalism by using words like 'reporter' when referring to an employee in the communications department. As argued in the quotation below, communications should take back the word 'media' from the traditional news media:

> *Journalists have, in a way, hogged the word 'media', […]. It is said that a person, a leader, can be a medium; a person can be a brand and a medium. I see that the word is more*

*universal than how it has been applied in everyday language. There are indeed strong reasons for that because we are creating the content that, for example, the mass media is using as it is. So, we are quite close to the media in that sense, too.* (City Media)

*I claim that the hedgehog defence by the commercial [news] media regarding this journalism theme or its monopoly of news is stupid. Instead, they should definitely consider us as their partners.* (Town Media)

Central to this rationale is that selected journalistic work practices are assumed to make interloper initiatives close to professional news media. An interviewee from a municipality-funded outlet described their content as 'commercial newsletters' or 'bulletins' which are 'something close to journalism', since they use journalistic interviewing techniques and writing styles. It is thus the journalistic operating methods which bring the interlopers from the fields of marketing or strategic communications closer to the journalistic field:

*[O]ur media outlet is about combining journalism and communications. And the thing, why we are not doing journalism – this has been discussed a lot – is that we are not critical towards the city administration, quite naturally, because we are city media, so we cannot operate as watchdogs. But I would say that our operating methods are journalistic, and… yeah, it is maybe that which makes the journalism for us.* (Town Media)

The interloper media value selected journalistic methods highly because they are assumed to help in making content, civic information, etc. more attractive and comprehensible for the audience:

*[W]e highlight, justify and open things [through journalistic methods] so that people can understand them.* (City Media)

They are both adopting some journalistic methods and ideals and reinventing them for the purposes of strategic and marketing communications or civic information. Being critical has been an essential principle of professional journalism (Bednarek, 2016; Harcup and O'Neill, 2001). To distinguish themselves, the interloper practitioners rearticulate the journalistic doxa by emphasising positivity over negativity and criticism as a news criterion: '[The legacy news media] are easily approaching things from a negative perspective, whereas we are much rather approaching the topics probably from a more positive perspective' (City Media) (Grafström and Rehnberg, 2022).

Within the rationale of (ii) *'Promotional or sponsored content has news value*', the interloper practitioners draw from journalistic ideals and news values to legitimise their promotion of the locality, local businesses and the communicative goals of the municipality. Promotional content purportedly has news value because it brings forth the characteristics of the locality. This illustrates the reinvention of the public service norm and the intertwinement of commercial and journalistic content. Practitioners in the city-funded media outlets were open about the wavering boundary between journalism and

advertising. For them, it does not violate their principles to promote the city's PR goals and write positive stories about companies – signalling that the area is vibrant and creating a sense of community for readers:

> *Yes, it [the boundary between journalism and advertising] has maybe been a bit wavering. [….] Maybe I go back to the idea that it would be good if the stories were positive and appealing to the tourists and give local residents or people who already live here a feeling that everything is going well here and we should be pleased with our municipality and stay here.* (Local Resident)

Within the second rationale, practices that enhance the blurring of journalism's boundaries are also defended by pleading to the fact that traditional legacy media publish native advertisements or sponsored content. Thus, the rationale profits from the lack of clarity within traditional journalism about the demarcation between sponsored and journalistic content (Hujanen et al., 2019). Positive news on local companies is not seen as problematic, since the media outlet or background organisation receives no direct financial gain. One municipality-linked media outlet earns revenue from local businesses. This is 'tolerable' because disseminating positive news about local companies is seen as promoting the area, thus benefiting residents. To sum up, the second rationale rearticulates the journalistic doxa to approve sponsored or promotional content as legitimate news and public service.

> *[S]o, if something happens in a company – like growth, changes, informing – they have the right to write there [in the news feed]. They can write them in the form of a story; you cannot really call that hidden advertising, but it is nevertheless writing about the life and viability of the area and the community when the companies are telling positive news and things like that.* (Town News)

> *It [the native advertisement] has to have news value so that it attracts interest. It cannot be like bragging that 'we have the best petrol in Finland'.* (Locally Now)

Regarding positivity, the two discussed rationales overlap but highlight different aspects of the same phenomenon. The rationale *'We are not quite making journalism, but we borrow its practices and vocabulary'* addresses positivity in the interlopers' use of journalistic methods to appeal to their audience – that is, people are assumed to want to read positive stories, which can be created through journalistic methods. However, the rationale *'Promotional or sponsored content has news value'* approaches positivity as a means of fostering a sense of community and constructing a dynamic picture of the locality – that is, positivity has more news value than negativity.

Blurring the boundaries between journalism and different forms of communications can also be seen in the ethical guidelines practitioners say they apply to tackle ethical contradictions. Local interloper media practitioners rely on three partially overlapping and even contradictory ethical rationales.

Within the rationale of (iii) *'Making journalistically ethical compromises is necessary and okay'*, the ethical principles of journalism and code of practice play an important but mostly a supportive and opportunistic role in practitioners' sense-making and attempts at appearing as journalism. In other words, they appropriate the cultural capital of journalistic ethics to enhance their position vis-à-vis professional journalism. The most often cited section of journalists' ethical guidelines in the interviews was that they are 'primarily responsible to the readers, listeners and viewers, who have the right to know what is happening in society'. Somewhat technical items of journalists' ethical guidelines regarding allowing an interviewee to check their statements and citations before publication and discretion when handling issues concerning minors were represented as central when answering whether the media outlet is producing journalism and acting according to journalistic norms:

> *Yeah, I think that we are following, or we do follow, those ethical guidelines for journalists. Like I said before, for me, the use [of the ethical guidelines] is emphasised in the stage where the news stories are being cross-checked. So, those are the ones that we are following.* (Town Media)

> *Only very few remember them [the guidelines for journalists] by heart, but I would say that having worked as a journalist for a long time has caused them to be somehow in my subconscious.* (Local Route)

The interlopers approach the guidelines instrumentally and opportunistically to legitimise their content production and make it appear serious and trustworthy. Within the third rationale, compromising with the ideals of journalism is seen as necessary and acceptable: 'if you are too uncompromising of a news journalist, then you cannot do this type of job' (Town Media). For example, within municipality-funded media outlets, following journalistic guidelines faithfully is perceived as impossible because the employer's ambitions cannot be ignored.

The interviewees also referred to ethical principles outside journalistic ethics in their attempt at appearing ethical and trustworthy. These include the ideals of fairness, equality and human rights: '[E]quality and human dignity [are important ethical principles], so I do not ever want to share anything that would offend some group of people in some way' (My Talk). The practitioners from the municipality- and city-funded outlets mentioned legislation and strategies and brand books by municipalities or cities as sources of their professional ethics. They stressed that the content must be in line with the values of the city that stem from these strategies and brand books. Statements about law, strategies and brand books were vague and lacked concrete items or examples: 'We have not written out any policies regarding communications ourselves in that way, but we do have the Local Government Act and recommendations by the Association of Finnish Municipalities, among other things, which we do follow' (City Media).

Interestingly, guidelines for PR, marketing and advertising played a minor role in the interviewees' talk. Only the social media influencer mentioned applying the Finnish guidelines regarding PR, marketing and advertising in their work. However, they

mentioned no concrete items or sections from the guidelines, and they referred to them as something that is not actively contemplated.

Some municipality or city media outlets have outlined their own ethical mottos, derived from the brand books that set an ideal for their content production. Such mottos include 'from person to person' and 'local, positive, accurate and subservient'. As interviewees stated, acting according to such mottos helps their media outlet stay relevant and comprehensive:

> *Our brand defines it so that we speak from person to person and we speak courageously and comprehensively, and so on. So, that is what we have followed here. […] [W]e don't want to obscure our messages with any city jargon.* (City Media)

The rationale of (iv) *'Let us just do it first and think about the ethical principles afterwards'* characterises the situational aspect of ethical consideration. Central to this rationale is that no deep reflection on ethical principles is prominent. Instead, the focus is on practical ethical questions that are discussed and solved when confronted: doing it first and then thinking about the principles. The ethical reflection here stresses *appearing* ethical rather than strictly fitting or grounding the media operations in existing professional ethical norms.

Behind the rationale seems to be the ambition to courageously adopt journalistic forms and methods in strategic and commercial communications. It is characterised by provoking, through which interviewees claimed they try to find their place in the local media landscape. They then admitted and accepted that ethical contradictions and clashes might occur that will lead to heated debates concerning the role and credibility of these media as journalistic actors, and that these clashes are perceived as lessons to learn. The rationale is, therefore, driven by the ambition to push or expand the boundaries of journalism without considering the ethical implications and outcomes in a wider societal context, like the role of journalism inherent to democratic processes. Municipality-funded media can face specific situations where compromise is necessary. For example, the ethical code of practice regarding their relation to power holders and decision-makers was described as obscure in our data. In the quotation below, an obscure notion of 'going where the heart tells me' is represented for Town Media as a way to reach a solution in a potential ethically contradictory situation:

> *I am not so sure, if I'm being totally honest, that if our town manager gets caught drink-driving, how we would handle the issue. Luckily, we have not yet faced such a situation, but I think that at some point, we have to think about it. [….] But I am the type of person who has always gone where the heart tells me. So, in a way, let's just do it first and think about the principles afterwards. Let's think about the rules afterwards.* (Town Media)

The rationale of (v) *'We experience pressure, but we are autonomous'* is inherently contradictory. As the name indicates, interloper media practitioners admitted to facing pressures and conflicts of interest but claimed they can nonetheless operate autonomously and make independent decisions:

> *[I] feel like I am biting a feeding hand if I start criticising the municipality or the parish, because they are the ones who are funding the paper. [….] I can create content very independently, so no criteria have been set nor has there ever been any positive or negative feedback, like 'Hey, you wrote a nice story!' or 'Hey, why did you write like this?'* (Local Resident)

In municipality or city media, pressure comes from politicians or public servants. The mentioned pressure concerned content that a person within the city organisation did not want to be disclosed: for instance, informing about budget cuts or unpopular decisions made by the local council, or interviewing persons that decision-makers consider controversial. The interviewees claimed that politicians or public servants do not adequately understand the role of the media and how it works and defended their own actions by pleading to openness.

Importantly, it is through the rationale of *'We experience pressure, but we are autonomous'* that the interloper media practitioners justify stories that politicians or public servants perceive as controversial. The interviewees expressed feeling the urge to resist the pressure to adhere to the values of the background organisation, such as the ideal of openness, and appear credible to citizens. In this sense, the media has a moralist role, although the ambitions of the employer are present and complied with:

> *Sometimes, we would not want to talk about difficult issues, but I think that we have to, because we are committed to openness and to a resident-centric approach and to involvement [of the residents]. We would be acting against all our values and strategy if we did not talk about them. But the way things are disclosed, so that they will be understood in the best possible way, there we can affect things through the means of communication. I do, however, remind [the civil servants and politicians] that it is not possible to turn black into white through communications. You must stick to the truth, but the tone can be altered to be more positive.* (City Media)

Within our data, the practitioners claimed that a possible way for them to solve conflicts of interest is to leave content unpublished or negative topics uncovered. Evaluations of or what to publish or retain in publications seemed to be made on a case-by-case basis. Among municipality- or city-funded actors, such evaluations were based on possible negative effects for the organisation or the locality. In commercial online news media, the decision not to publish something was portrayed as stemming more from the guidelines for journalists, for example, when pondering whether to write about a local doctor who had been accused but not convicted of medical malpractice.

## Discussion

Drawing from field theory, we have examined the discursive boundary work that interloper media practitioners do when making sense of their work and ethical practice (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Carlson and Lewis, 2020; Eldridge, 2014). We have focused on the journalistic and ethical principles and practices that play a

role in (re)constructing the boundary between professional journalism and other fields of media and communications (Carlson and Lewis, 2020). The results of the qualitative interviews with interlopers were compiled into five rationales that synthesise the argumentative strategies of their boundary work: (i) *'We are not quite making journalism, but we borrow its practices and vocabulary'*; (ii) *'Promotional or sponsored content has news value'*; (iii) *'Making journalistically ethical compromises is necessary and okay'*; (iv) *'Let us just do it first and think about the ethical principles afterwards'*; and (v) *'We experience pressure, but we are autonomous'*.

The rationales illustrate a discursive contest over the vocabulary and notions of journalism and media, showing that the interlopers actively participate in (re)defining the boundaries of journalism outside the profession. Their statements evince that this boundary expansion is attempted by appropriating journalistic styles, language and selected ethical guidelines. The interlopers' motivation to undertake this type of boundary work arguably stems from a need to appear as more legitimate and attractive: mixing together news-like content, civic information and infotainment can help to create a sense of shared meaning with audiences and thus serve their communicative-strategic ends (see Li, 2019; Thomas and Stephens, 2014).

The rationales show that the interloper practitioners aim at employing selective journalistic methods and doxa in their strategic or commercial communications, and they frame their practices as close to journalism. Through metajournalistic discourses, they contest the authority of legacy media to define the borders of journalism (Carlson, 2016). They question the monopoly of legacy news media on news and the assumed 'core' of journalism. Further, they strive to profit from ethical concessions and the blurring of the demarcation between news and sponsored content within legacy media.

Among the interloper media practitioners, ethical sense-making concerns balancing and compromising between partially contradictory codes of ethics. From the viewpoint of journalistic ethics, it seems to be more about *appearing* ethical. The guidelines mentioned were partially contradictory and rather technical codes about work processes, such as letting interviewees check the text before it is published. By aiming at appearing journalistically ethical, the interlopers bolster the legitimacy and credibility of their field of work. Consequently, it can be argued that interloper media are *performing journalism* but doing so selectively and opportunistically.

Also noteworthy is that the ethical practice is situational and personal: it is characterised by ad hoc ethical decisions at an individual level. Thus, the interloper media practitioners define themselves in practice instead of being defined by an institution. This may connect to our observation that ethical reflection at an institutional level is absent from the rationales, as well as self-critical consideration of the consequences of their practices at a societal level: what the blurring of boundaries means for the fields of journalism and communications and how their media are positioned within the borders of these fields. Here, the interlopers exploit a broader trend in journalism, where journalistic autonomy, doxa and habitus are being defined by individual journalists and journalistic collectives rather than news institutions (Harte et al., 2016; Heft and Dogruel, 2019).

The rationales rearticulate the journalistic doxa to approve sponsored content as legitimate news and promotional content as a public service. They highlight the role of

interloper media in informing people about positive local developments, enhancing local businesses and promoting the locality. By appealing to the journalistic doxa of public service, the publication of sponsored content is justified by news value. The study thus indicates that the interloper practitioners highly value the promotion of the locality and the communicative goals of the municipality or local businesses and discard the journalistic ideal of detachment and critical inquiry as central points of reference and institutional foundations. The practitioners hesitated to admit this openly, but the promotional mindset became obvious in the opportunistic and ad hoc use of ethical codes and the topics they considered relevant. By appearing as journalistically ethical, the interlopers thus diminish and dispel the inherent conflict between the principles of strategic communications and journalism. Despite the acknowledgement that the background organisation sets limitations, they argued autonomy is possible. Critical reflection on the relation to power holders is, however, absent and the role of watchdog is externalised to traditional news media.

If they are to produce serious and ethical, yet promotional, content, it would be important for the interloper local media outlets to define their ethical principles at the institutional level. An ethical code of practice would guide their everyday work, make their operations more transparent for the audiences, and clarify which kind of content they are producing. Regarding future research, as we have focused on practitioners' self-perceptions, it is important to expand the study of interloper media to their content (Grafström and Rehnberg, 2022): how conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas affect and can be seen in their actual content.

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