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LOCALLY, REGIONALLY AND NATIONALLY ONLINE: ONLINE NEWS COMMENTS SECTIONS AS PUBLIC ARENAS IN GEOGRAPHICALLY ANCHORED MEDIA STRUCTURES

Veera Kangaspunta

This article examines online news comments sections as both representing an example of and a subject concerning changing media structures, the changing relationship between users and media outlets, the way this relationship is influenced by the (changing) understanding of place and, especially, the way users participate in the new public arenas provided by geographically anchored online media sources. The focus is on Finnish online media in its golden era, the early 2010s. The analysis of user comments left in the comments sections of a small local newspaper, a regional newspaper and a national newspaper suggests that geography matters. Comments sections serve as public arenas for discussions of shared issues, specified through geography, and construct public spheres. Especially in the local context, the meaning of such public arenas should not be underestimated.

Introduction

We live in a world that is constantly changing. Today, the internet represents one of the biggest changes in itself, and it is the main force behind many changes. In the field of media, among others, the changes are inclusive—the internet has changed the world's media structure and its operational environment. Many of these transitions relate to place and geography (Buchanan 2009; Ewart 2003; Hess 2012; Mersey 2009), since the virtual world has changed how we relate to places—how a place does or does not matter (Creswell 2009; Massey 1995). At the same time, the internet has transformed the traditional media–audience relationship to a media–user relationship and provided new public arenas for participation in the public sphere[1] (see, e.g. Graham and Wright [2014]; Reich [2011]).

This paper examines online news comments as an intersection of these changes. The user[2] comments following online news articles highlight the changing relationship between users and media, the way this relationship is influenced by (changing) understandings of place and, especially, how users participate in the new public arenas provided by online media. This analysis focuses on one specific time and context—Finnish online media in 2012. The early 2010s represented both a fundamental change in the overall Finnish

media structure and, more importantly, something of a golden era of online newspapers and comments in Finland. Most traditional print newspapers had launched online versions that had (and still have) geographically strong ties and agendas. Further, many provided free or partly free access to all content, and it was possible to comment anonymously or via pseudonym. Consequently, commenting on these websites was very popular.

However, the background of this "new" media structure was built on a traditional and geographically formed setting. In the Finnish context, people tended to have a strong identity relationship with their habitat, and municipalities, both culturally and administratively, had "a specific publicity and presence in the lives of inhabitants" (Paasi 1998, 186–187).[3] Consequently, this specific publicity was mainly constructed through local media—newspapers, radio, etc. published in an area of one or a few municipalities—as they had a special relationship with the residents (Ojajärvi 2014) and represented a key element in local democracies (Heinonen 2000; Nieminen 2004a). On a wider level, a strong and unique county (or regional) press systematically built and represented something that could be considered a county (or regional) identity (Hujanen 2000; Moring 2000; Paasi 1998). Unsurprisingly, both international and Finnish research show that geography and locality have remained relevant even in the online media era (Mersey 2009; Ojajärvi 2014)—local newspapers have "a unique task that is clearly geographically rooted" (Mersey 2009, 348).

By contrast, it seems obvious that the internet has significantly changed our relationship with the media, both in relation to geography, since online content makes it possible to share issues on a wider scale, and by creating new relationships between people and media institutions. In short, the traditional media–audience relationship has been increasingly transformed into a media–user relationship (Graham and Wright 2014). Instead of mainly consuming media content, people now use and produce it, and this complexity can serve several motives, aims and needs, both individually and societally (Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger 2015).

However, there is little research concerning how Finnish online newspaper users—previously understood mainly as readers of traditional print papers—dealt with these changes in the media structure, in relation to places and geography, and in relation to their new role as users. Therefore this study aims to answer, *What is the relevance of traditional geographically anchored media structure to online newspaper users?* (RQ1a) and *What is the relevance of the new public arenas (of public sphere) in this geographically anchored media structure to online newspaper users?* (RQ1b). To answer these questions, the analysis focuses on *How does geography become visible in online newspaper users' comments?* (RQ2a), more specifically, *How do online newspaper users use places and locations as discursive resources in news comments?* (RQ2b) and *How do online newspaper users use and negotiate place-related identities in news comments?* (RQ2c). Previously, researchers mostly considered the geographic relevance of users' online news comments in relation to news values, such as familiarity, proximity, or damage (Weber 2014). Adding more depth, this paper aims to explain how the online users reflect the nature of the local, regional or national "publicity" (Paasi 1998) that they embody. The study uses place as an analytical tool, since the manner in which we connect to places and define our home—and thus, relate to and understand the world—can be seen both in constant transition and yet unchanged (e.g. Duyvendak 2011), alongside the transformation–permanence process in the media structure (Hess 2012; Pauly and Eckert 2002).

The article first builds a theoretical framework, bringing together the different dimensions of the changing media structure, media–user relationship and public arenas, and then

presents place and related concepts. The context of the case and the actual case are introduced next. The research material consists of users' comments from three online Finnish newspapers relating to news coverage of a specific environmental accident in northern Finland in November 2012. The analysis includes a pre-analysis and a main qualitative content analysis. The pre-analysis aims to map out and categorise place-related phrases. The main content analysis examines the use of these phrases in relation to the theoretical framework and research questions. Finally, the results of the analysis are presented and discussed.

The Theoretical Framework

Place and Locality in Changing Media Structures

A sense of place and home are crucial to locally, regionally and nationally based traditional media, as their functionality is built on people's engagement with specific, geographically framed agendas. The history of newspapers fits this tradition, where a town, city, county or nation provides the operational context for newspapers (Buchanan 2009; Hujanen 2000; Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017; Wiio 2006). However, the breakthrough of online media content changed this traditional setting (Ewart 2003; Falkheimer and Jansson 2006; Hess 2012). Researchers have also argued that geographic location (and belonging) is beginning to lose its taken-for-granted primacy concerning what we deem newsworthy (Buchanan 2009; see also, P. Weber [2014]). Journalism studies offer numerous analyses of these changes and their impact (Buchanan 2009; Franklin 2006; Hess 2012; Nielsen 2015; Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017; Pauly and Eckert 2002). One of the main concerns has been the role of local media: "[f]or what purpose do people need the local newspaper anymore, if they can follow the entire world through the internet and join other interesting communities?" (Sillanpää 2011, 111, transl.).

Despite such concerns, a newly reorganised conceptualisation of places shows that geography remains important to journalism. For example, Hess (2012, 49) suggested the concept of the "geo-social" to highlight both the geographic and social sides of local newspapers, news and meaning-making processes. The rise of the hyperlocal media of the internet era is another example of the growing meaning of locality (Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017). According to Mersey (2009), one way for newspapers to remain relevant in this changing environment is to embrace geography. In relation to users, Ewart (2003) suggests that (regional) online newspapers continue to develop and provide spaces for regional public discussions—connections based on "geographical areas or communities of interest, that is, communities of people wanting to discuss a particular issue."

The Public Participation, Public Arenas and Heritage of Public Sphere Theory

Users' comments have often been examined from the theoretical perspective of public participation (Reich 2011) or civic engagement (Manosevitch and Walker 2009), grounded in the deliberative public sphere theory. However, in this study, the public sphere is not understood as a normative concept, so the analysis avoids evaluating user comments, for example, from the perspectives of their deliberative qualities (c.f., Ruiz et al. 2011). This study's theoretical point of departure is the early work of Jürgen Habermas

([1962] 1989; [1964] 1974), where the public sphere was referred to as a specific "realm of our social life," a part of which "comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" ([1964] 1974, 49). This elementary definition of a "realm" that "comes into being" begs the question of how people participate in, articulate and construct this realm in contemporary media conditions.

This paper regards the public sphere as an imagined and real conceptual entity, coming into being through public participation in public arenas[4] and in several scales, from local to global. Public arenas are understood as concrete spaces, such as mass media, social media or a town meeting, which provide forums for public discussions and participation of all societal actors, such as politicians, citizens, and journalists. Together, the spaces and the content create the public sphere or spheres, layered and intertwining, though sometimes independent. Similarly, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) see public spheres as consortiums of space, discursive patterns and participants[5]—to them, one space represents one public sphere. However, here, the public sphere is understood as composition of several possible public arenas, such as a (conceptual) local public sphere constituted from public participation (discussion, visual content, etc.) in local media (several arenas) and other public forums (town meetings, etc.).

The main foci of this study are the changing media structure and the media–user relationship, which are regenerating new public arenas and participation. Interestingly, users' comments are emerging in the public arena provided online, but also show strong geographic attachments. Additionally, issues evoking users' public participation are firmly connected to people's everyday lives offline and become visible in online users' actions (Barnes 2018). The setting relates to Dewey's ([1927] 1954) widely known idea of public participation emerging when people face indirect consequences of various societal actions and operations, and when they aim to address these consequences together as a public ([1927] 1954; c.f., Habermas [1964] 1974). (For more about the issue-based public, see, Kangaspunta [2018b]; Marres [2005]; and Pietilä [2001].) To Dewey, shared issues, needed to be solved, created public participation. However, the present study does not follow Dewey's theory further, but rather acknowledges the high meaning of shared issues.

Place, Scale, Home, Identity and Place Attachment

Campbell (2018, 23) defines "places" as "physical spaces that people naturalise through patterns, behaviour and communications." According to Creswell (2009, 4), the core question of humanistic geography is this naturalising process, "how we relate to our environment and make it into place." A place has to have a meaning—a *sense* of place—otherwise, it is merely a location. Places are imagined (Knuuttila 2006), "relational and contingent, experienced and understood differently by different people" (Hubbard and Kitchin 2011, 7). Furthermore, the logic, meaning and understanding of places change as we move in varying scales, from home to nation, or even globally (Knuuttila 2006; see also, Creswell [2009]). For example, discussing a country as a place differs substantially from discussing a specific area, neighbourhood or favourite forest. From a national perspective, we rely on our imaginations and general level; in a smaller and closer perspective, we refer to concrete and specific features.

What makes places so meaningful? Typically, places are associated with the ideas of persistence and belonging (Forselles-Riska 2006; Kymäläinen 2006). Morley (2001; see also, Duyvendak [2011]) refers to places, like households, nations and local communities, as

spaces of belonging—noting that we need to belong somewhere. Consequently, home typically represents the core of belonging—"a symbol for universal attachment" (Creswell 2009, 5). Even though home can operate at different scales and levels—pointing to a house, (home)town or (home)country—traditionally, it has been considered as an "ideal" (Creswell 2009, 5) or "safe" place (Knuuttila 2006, 8). For this reason, discussions of the assumed loosening of geographic ties in making places meaningful (Duyvendak 2011) relates strongly to discussions about home (Buchanan 2009).

Places, homes, habitats and communities are also essential parts of our individual and shared—or personal and collective—identities. They have a role in our understanding of both ourselves and our relationships with others (Hogg 2006). However, these different levels of (place-related) identities are not separated, and places can also work as the tie between individual and shared identities. Sillanpää (2011, 179, transl.) explains:

> Essential to local and regional identity—whether a national, county or otherwise—is the relationship between individual and social identity. Questions like "Who am I?" or "Who are we?" are always problematic. [...] Regional identities are also narratives about who and what "we" and "our region" are.

People are both "I in us" and "us together," and this constant two-level identity ties "us" together in communicative processes. We define, construct and protect shared meaningful places that are essential to our identities. According to Creswell (2009, 7), "[p]eople connect a place with a particular identity and proceed to defend it against the threatening outside with its different identities." Consequently, separations of "us/them" and "outsiders/insiders" (Kymäläinen 2006, 209) often create identity-related conflicts.

Understandably, the way we construct individual and shared place- and home-related identities has changed and become more complex, not only due to the internet but strongly due to increasing mobility and individualism (Knuuttila 2006). Capturing contemporary fluidity, Paasi (1998, 180; see also, Sillanpää [2011]) connects identity with "temporal and social continuity", making identity a "dynamic, constantly shaping process." In the era of a mobilised and globalised multimedia, our new hybrid identities (Hall 1999) are built on several factors where place and home only represent one (Kymäläinen 2006; Paasi 1998), but nonetheless crucial, factor (Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017; Paasi and Metzger 2017).

Here, the relevance of place- (and home-)related identity, both individual and collective, is not in the separation of the two, but in how the questions "Who am I?," "Who are we?" and "Who are you?" relate to geography and media structures. This analysis is built on the idea that geographical places are being communicatively constructed, imagined and experienced, and this process also reflects the building of and discussions on identities. Antonsich (2010, 644) calls for an analysis of belonging "both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)." The study leans on the understanding of the "functional and emotional/symbolic meanings" of places (Williams and Roggenbuck 1989; see also Morley [2001]) and the discursive/constructionist approach to place attachment:

> The discursive perspective treats place attachment as a *social practice* that cannot be understood outside of the interactional, cultural, and institutional contexts in which it emerges. [...] it entails a reconceptualisation of place attachment as a discursive resource

that individuals deploy within their everyday interactions [...]. (Di Masso, Dixon, and Durrheim 2014, 81)

The Research Context

Finnish newspapers—like others worldwide (Buchanan 2009; Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017)—tend to have strong historical bonds to geographical areas (Hujanen 2000; Wiio 2006). They have roughly three tiers. *Local* newspapers usually follow the happenings of one specific town or city and are printed 1–3 times weekly. With small circulations, these newspapers maintain a highly place-oriented agenda. *Regional* papers have their roots in the old system of provinces. The circulation of such regional papers varies (10,000–70,000 subscribers), and the print version is usually published daily, or six times weekly (Media Audit Finland 2012). They follow a regional agenda, including local news from specific towns and cities, while also reporting on national and international issues from a regional perspective when possible. Nowadays, both local and regional Finnish newspapers tend to have monopoly status in their own context—there is usually only one per town or region/county. *National* newspapers are typically topic-based (economy, agriculture, etc.), tabloids or mainstream papers. The only national mainstream newspaper in Finland is *Helsingin Sanomat*. It has over 300,000 subscribers, and the print version is published daily (Media Audit Finland 2012). It carries international and national news on a wide range of topics, but has its roots in Helsinki, so it still covers local and regional news from the area. Interesting in the Finnish media structure is the high relevance and strong history of local and especially regional/county newspapers (Hujanen 2000), and the scarcity and short history of national mainstream newspapers. As such, this geographically anchored structure has affected the newspaper–audience relationship (Kärki 2004) and the role of newspapers in building regional identities (Hujanen 2000; Moring 2000).

Moreover, Finland is increasingly divided geographically and politically between the heartland, including the metropolitan area in the South and the other main cities and developing centres of growth, and the periphery, including the North and the areas losing inhabitants to urbanisation and rising unemployment. These struggling periphery areas are usually referred as the "countryside," even though agriculture is only one of its main industries. (Malinen et al. 2006.)

One specific news item can be followed at different levels of media, from local to national, providing a chance to observe varying perspectives. The present case study for analysing users' comments focuses on a major environmental accident in November 2012: a wastewater leak at the Talvivaara Mine (now called Terrafame), in the small northern town of Sotkamo (pop. 10,000), in Kainuu (a county of 70,000), a representative of the periphery. Sotkamo also constitutes a crossing of three counties: Kainuu, Northern Savonia and Northern Karelian.

Briefly, a mine-owned gypsum pond began leaking on 4 November 2012. In the first days, some of the toxic water poured directly into the surrounding environment, but most was contained within so-called safety ponds and dams. Initially, the focus was on stopping the leak. In addition, as the mine area filled with water, the company created passages of "neutralised wastewater" to nearby rivers. The leak, additional water passages and older water passages (related to the usual activity at the mine) affected the surrounding environment. These effects were followed and measured by county and national authorities and environmental organisations.

The Finnish media at all levels reported on the accident (Harju and Karvonen 2016; Kangaspunta 2018a). From a national perspective, this was seen as the largest environmental crisis in Finnish history, and the mine became a symbol of the failures of the national mining industry (Tiainen, Sairinen, and Mononen 2014). Regionally and locally, it was seen through the lens of concrete effects on the area's residents and discussed in relation to environmental hazards and employment concerns (Kangaspunta 2018a). All told, the media coverage played a major role in shaping Talvivaara's reputation as a meaningful, symbolic place suddenly loaded with social and political relevance. The media helped people around the country to imagine the place.

The Research Material: Three Online Newspapers

Grounded in this context, the research data for this study consist of users' comments on online articles about the Talvivaara leak in three newspapers:

(1)   A small local paper, *Sotkamo-lehti* (SL) (in 2012, free access, no registration required, pre-moderated) is a typical local paper and focuses on local issues.
(2)   The regional *Kainuun Sanomat* (KS) (in 2012, free access, no registration, pre-moderated) is a typical regional paper with a wider agenda and county perspective.
(3)   The national paper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) (in 2012, partially chargeable online content, registration required, pre-moderated) reports both national and world news, but also covers stories from the Helsinki area.

Data were collected from online archives using the search term "Talvivaara" and includes all comments following news articles[6] published online in November 2012 related to the mining company, not merely the leak, since the leak resulted in several other incidents and discussions of the company (Kangaspunta 2018a). This data setting includes 9,499 comments on 278 news articles. SL published 71 articles with 1,648 comments; KS published 123 articles with 6,186 comments; and HS published 84 articles with 1,665 comments.

Pre-analysis Methodology and Results

Quantitative and Qualitative Content Analyses

Content analysis is a set of quantitative and/or qualitative methods focused mainly on texts (Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018; R. P. Weber 1990). From a social sciences perspective, the aim of an analysis can be to "reflect cultural patterns of groups, institutions, or societies; [...]; and describe trends in communication content" (R. P. Weber 1990, 9). This can be done by recognising (qualitative) and counting (quantitative) textual elements, analysing their meaning from certain theoretical perspectives (qualitative) and statistically analysing their relationships (quantitative) (Riffe et al. 1998; Tuomi and Sarajärvi 2018).

The pre-analysis and main analysis below aim to answer the research questions RQ2a, RQ2b and RQ2c. Since the focus of this study is written comments, the research connects to poststructuralist approaches on place and focuses on *how places—as communicative constructs—are written about* (Kymäläinen 2006). Additionally, the main analysis strives to understand *why places are written about in certain ways* and *with what consequences*.

The Pre-analysis Process and Results

The first phase of the pre-analysis was an extensive search of all references to places and locations (e.g. "Sotkamo," "here," "in Talvivaara"); the origins of people and things (e.g. "locals"); and home, habitat and identity (e.g. "I," "we," "you," "homeland," "the people of Kainuu") in the comments. A list of *recognised phrases* was based on this, and terms were grouped and categorised. The categories were: 1. *Geography and scale*, divided by a) geographic location and agency, b) origin of people (and things); and 2. *Talvivaara mine*, divided by a) as a locale and place, b) causing effects (see Tables 1 and 2).

The next phase was a quantitative counting of references to recognised phrases from each category presented in Tables 1 and 2. The analysis aimed to examine the variety of used phrases and the differences between selected online comments sections (SL, KS and HS). Each comment was examined holistically. Each reference was documented individually and only once from each unit (comment). References to synonymic phrases that were substantially different in their spelling or/and meaning were documented separately. For example, "locals" and "natives of Sotkamo" are at some level synonymic but can express very different purposes.

The results from all comments sections were similar in how they highlighted geographic location and agency; the origins of people (and things) and the effects of Talvivaara

Table 1.
References to Geography and Scale.

Newspaper	a) Geographic location and agency	Local (near) and hyperlocal	Regional	National	Global
SL n=1,013 references	In total 387 references (38.2%)/ 54 phrases	150 ref./ 7 phr.	107 ref./ 30 phr.	87 ref./ 8 phr.	43 ref./ 9 phr.
KS n=3,795 references	In total 1531 references (40.3%)/ 65 phrases	217 ref./ 12 phr.	716 ref./ 25 phr.	332 ref./ 9 phr.	266 ref./ 19 phr.
HS n=2,310 references	In total 806 references (34.9%)/ 81 phrases	15 ref./ 2 phr.	219 ref./ 37 phr.	421 ref./ 6 phr.	205 ref./ 36 phr.
	b) Origin of people (and things)	**Local (near) and hyperlocal**	**Regional**	**National**	**Global**
SL n=1,013 references	In total 210 references (20.7%)/ 32 phrases	118 ref./ 17 phr.	30 ref./ 4 phr.	47 ref./ 9 phr.	15 ref./ 2 phr.
KS n=3,795 references	In total 1031 references (27.2%)/ 63 phrases	278 ref./ 28 phr.	364 ref./ 12 phr.	323 ref./ 15 phr.	67 ref./ 8 phr.
HS n=2,310 references	In total 632 references (27.3%)/ 36 phrases	183 ref./ 12 phr.	46 ref./ 6 phr.	359 ref./ 14 phr.	44 ref./ 4 phr.

n = overall number of references in both categories.

Table 2
References to **Talvivaara Mine**.

Newspaper	a) As a locale and place			
SL n=1,013 references	134 references (13.2%)/ 7 phrases			
KS n=3,795 references	291 references (7.7%)/ 10 phrases			
HS n=2,310 references	251 references (10.9%)/ 16 phrases			
	b) Causing effects	**Nearby nature/ environment**	**Names of specific places and locations**	**Nature/ environment in general**
SL n=1,013 references	In total 282 references (27.8%)/ 52 phrases	131 ref./ 15 phr.	113 ref./ 33 phr.	38 ref./ 4 phr.
KS n=3,795 references	In total 942 references (24.8%)/ 68 phrases	411 ref./ 20 phr.	375 ref./ 44 phr.	156 ref./ 4 phr.
HS n=2,310 references	In total 621 references (26.9%)/ 61 phrases	212 ref./ 18 phr.	186 ref./ 37 phr.	223 ref./ 6 phr.

(on places) come second or third in their relevance, and the mine as a locale and place in itself was clearly least common, indicating that when users referred to places, they favoured phrases concerning geography and their habitat. The most visible differences among comment materials appeared in the axis of local–regional–national–global. Concerning geography and scale, most phrases in SL had a local perspective, KS had a regional perspective, and HS a national perspective. Concerning the effects, in SL and KS the focus was on the nearby nature and environment, and on specific rivers and lakes. In HS, the general perspective was also used.

The overall number of references in the comment materials was counted (Table 3). The results suggest that users refer to places and locations rather systematically.

Table 3.
The overall use of phrases: Number of comments with one or more references to Category 1 or/and 2.

Newspaper	Number of all comments	Comments to category 1 & 2		Number of references
		Total	Percent	
SL	1,648	842	51.1	1,013
KS	6,186	2,780	44.9	3,795
HS	1,665	1,096	65.8	2,310

Table 4.
The mostly used phrases.

	Category 1	Category 2
SL		
	• Sotkamo (as a location and a municipality), 104 comments • Finland (as a location and a country), 53 comments • Kainuu (as a region), 52 comments • A person from Sotkamo, 33 comments • We/us (from Sotkamo), 33 comments	• The mining area, 45 comments • Nearby environment, 28 comments • Nearby drainage systems, 19 comments • (- specific names of rivers and lakes, altogether 80 references to 20 names)
KS		
	• Kainuu (as a region), 383 comments • Finland (as a location and a country),176 comments • Sotkamo (as a location and a municipality),113 comments • A person from Kainuu, 157 comments • We/us: from Sotkamo, 32 comments; from Kainuu 35; from Finland 40	• The environment (in general), 111 comments • Nearby drainage systems, 106 comments • The mining area, 90 comments • (- specific names of rivers and lakes, altogether 216 references to 23 names)
HS		
	• Finland (as a location and a country), 265 comments • The country, 73 comments • The state, 69 comments • (the three above relate to Finland, altogether 407 comments) • We/us (from Finland), 105 comments • A taxpayer, 49 comments • (the two above relate to citizenship, altogether 154 comments) • Kainuu (as a region), 57 comments	• Drainage systems (in general), 69 comments • The environment (in general), 76 comments • The mining area, 73 comments • (- specific names of rivers and lakes, altogether 49 references to 12 names)

The most commonly used phrases were also listed to give direction when focusing the main analysis (Table 4).

The Qualitative Content Analysis

In the main content analysis, the focus was on the dominant categories and most-used phrases. To keep the analysis to a reasonable scope, the material was limited to comments on the three most commented-on articles from each newspaper—1,120 comments on nine articles. From these comment threads, comments including the most commonly used phrases (Table 3) were examined with the following questions:

• What is the user's relationship (personal and/or social/political) to the referred (meaningful) place/places, home/habitat and location(s)?

- What is the explicit and/or implicit meaning (both functional and emotional/symbolic) of place, location, origin, home/habitat as a discursive resource and social practise?
- How does the user understand or represent her/himself in relation to others?
- How do these findings relate to the geographically anchored media structure?

The Results of Content Analysis

In SL, most references to Sotkamo, both as a location and municipality, related to home and residency (Comment 1). More implicitly, Sotkamo was present as a municipality with its residents, the "we" and "locals" (Comments 2 and 3). Additionally, this relationship with habitat worked as a rationale for having an opinion. As a person from Sotkamo, a user could argue that the mine is not bothersome, or refer to her/himself and others as victims.

COMMENT 1: […] I am a common person from Sotkamo, and the presence of Talvivaara hasn't bothered me in any way. […].[7] (SL, 29.11.2012)

COMMENT 2: […] the municipal council […] What do you suppose we, who suffer the consequences of the accident, are thinking?!! (SL 12.11.2012)

COMMENT 3: […] No one can help us local sufferers. […] WHERE ARE OUR COUNCILMEN […]. (SL 29.11.2012)

By addressing other local actors, such as councilmen (Comments 2 and 3), and by calling for action (for more about different types of comments, see Papacharissi [2004]), users produced the idea of local public discussion and local publicity with certain (potential) participants (c.f., Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). More implicitly, this was visible in discussions on the effects of the accident (Comment 4)—who was facing the consequences? (Dewey [1927] 1954; Tuan, [2004] 2006).

COMMENT 4: The nearby people are not the only ones suffering from this mess, but also the Talvivaara employees, owners, entrepreneurs of Vuokatti … […]. (SL, 29.11.2012)

The SL users also referred to a wider scale, especially to Finland as a location and country, and to Kainuu as a region, but usually in relation Sotkamo. The scales were stratifying, and one comment could include the phrases "old saying from Kainuu" and "local people from Sotkamo" (SL, 29.11.2012). In some comments (e.g. Comment 5), Kainuu represented more than a county—it has a regional and historical status with its own unique roots. These imagined roots gave the phrase "people of Kainuu" the power to represent a potential shared identity as people from the periphery, defending their region and its livelihood (Creswell 2009).

COMMENT 5: I was watching A-Studio [television programme] about a rally in Kajaani. There were no people from Kainuu. Only the greens from Southern Finland. […]. (SL, 12.11.2012)

As seen in Table 1, most of the we/us phrases related to Sotkamo; other phrases emphasised the role of the local people and created the sense of a highly local discussion. Furthermore, at the heart of this discussion were concrete incidents at the mine and the effects on the nearby environment. The overall assumption penetrating most of the discussion was the idea of local individuals discussing shared local issues. Of course, some users represented

themselves as outsiders, giving another perspective and questioning the idea of locals as experts on the issue (Comment 6). These comments and phrases also strengthened the idea of the locally built public sphere, where the outsiders participated as outsiders, like "the readers of the online newspaper from the downstream" (SL, 29.11.2012).

> COMMENT 6: You can see better at a distance … in this case the Talvivaara environmental harms. (SL, 22.11.2012)

In KS, the county perspective was highlighted, and users systematically referred to Kainuu county and its people. However, the perspective was also a combination of local (Comment 6), regional (Comment 9) and national (Comment 8) views. This also became visible in the pre-analysis: the we/us phrases related almost as much to Sotkamo, Kainuu and Finland (Table 1). Users were participating in something understood as a regional discussion, and in several cases articulating their own personal position through residency (Comments 7 and 8), either in Sotkamo, Kainuu or elsewhere.

> COMMENT 7: […] as a person living by the Jormasjärvi […]. At no point have I requested the closing of Talvivaara, but that they consider environmental issues the way we common citizens do. (KS, 5.11.2012)

> COMMENT 8: […] Is it worth sacrificing the whole nearby nature for some mine? Talvivaara cannot be that important. R. southern man. (KS, 5.11.2012)

Comment 8 above demonstrates the national contradictions between southern metropolitan Finland and the northern periphery. In relation to this debate, users explicitly and implicitly defined the Kainuu regional identity and highlighted the meaning of being a native of Kainuu or Savonia counties—"the nation of Kainuu and Savonia, tribesmen and tribeswomen" (KS, 5.11.2012) (see, Paasi [2003]).

> COMMENT 9: […] Now, the whole nation of Kainuu should be saving Talvivaara side by side […]. (KS 10.11.2012)

Paasi (1998) has argued that, from a Finnish historical perspective, traditional counties are highly significant. In the case of Talvivaara, Kainuu county's traditional identity seems to be built on appreciating employment, and the new, challenging identity seems built on valuing nature. At some level, these two identities also fluctuate between the individual and shared, representing the transition from the so-called old identities, built on places, and being more shared, toward new identities and built more individually on values and worldviews (Hall 1999; Nieminen 2004b; Sillanpää 2011).

The users' need to defend a place (Creswell 2009) related to discussions on the effects of the accident and mine. In KS, the discussion repeated the local–regional–national combination, as seen in Comments 10, 11 and 12. At the most local, even hyperlocal (see, Nygren et al. [2017]), level, the question was about certain lakes and rivers and their connections. At the regional level, the question was whether the effects spread to larger drainage systems, affecting other counties (especially Northern Savonia) in the downstream waters. At the national level, the question was about the value of a clean environment. This also emerged in the pre-analysis, where comments about the effects of the

Talvivaara Mine (Category 2b) varied from general to specific names and references to "nearby" (Table 2).

> COMMENT 10: There is a connection from Jormasjärvi to Nuasjärvi and thus also to Kajaaninjoki and so on … […] (KS, 5.11.2012)

> COMMENT 11: […] People here at the lower waters are probably going to be following too. […] (KS, 4.11.2012)

> COMMENT 12: All mines in Finland are the same! […] the mining law needs to be changed immediately! So that the dirty tentacles of market economy won't ruin our clean nature everywhere! (KS, 5.11.2012)

All in all, KS users seemed to be systematic in placing themselves not only in geographical scale, whether from Sotkamo, Kainuu, Savonia or southern Finland, but also more individually, based on values on a totally different axis. Both practices indicate an understanding of a certain geographically anchored regional public sphere, as the comment sections represented an arena for public discussions of certain place-related issues.

In HS, the pre-analysis highlighted the volume of phrases at the national and state levels (Tables 1–3). In references to people and their origins, the phrases "we/us" (from Finland) and "taxpayer" were repeated. Interestingly, users seemed to prefer "the state" or similar phrases (Comment 13) when using words such as "taxpayer" or "citizen." This indicates a different relationship to Finland as an agent, where users represent citizens, and not primarily as a home or habitat.

> COMMENT 13: […]The Finnish environmental administration is surely strict and efficient to keep discipline towards own country citizens […]. (HS 7.11.2012)

However, the discussion had several levels. When talking about the effects of the mine, the users' perspectives could be as local as in SL and KS (Comments 14 and 15), or at the general level, in phrases about the drainage systems (in general) and the environment (in general). These more general phrases relate to the idea of imagining places (e.g. Hubbard and Kitchin 2011; Knuuttila 2006)—users distant from the actual effects had not seen or physically experienced the actual places. Additionally, in many comments, the effects of the leaks were understood as a national issue (Comment 16), one with negative consequences for taxpayers or reflecting the Finnish human–nature relationship.

> COMMENT 14: […] people are forced to leave their residences, their fishing waters and summer cottages […] (HS, 7.11.2012)

> COMMENT 15: […] until the waste water is already spread out to wide area in the nearby environment. […] (HS, 9.11.2012)

> COMMENT 16: […] polluting everything that this floodwater goes to. The Talvivaara fiasco is going to have a hard price for Finland and Finns […] (HS, 7.11.2012)

The local perspective in Comments 14 and 15 indicates that people from both Sotkamo and Kainuu participated in the HS discussion. This assumption is confirmed in the almost identical Comments 19 and 20 from HS and KS, which were likely written by the same user. Further, the participation of northern users became visible in the wide debate built on

periphery versus metropolitan areas. This confrontation is evident in Comment 17, with reference to unemployment issues "here in the North" and to people of the metropolitan area. By contrast, users locating themselves in the metropolitan area or south in general also responded to these arguments (Comment 18).

> COMMENT 17: […] there has been no real employers here in the north […] Wondering and bemoaning are well suitable inside the ring 3[8] […] ignoring the life rights of people in the periphery. (HS, 7.11.2012)

> COMMENT 18: Keep your water, swim in it and drink it, but do not offer to this southern crow […] (HS, 9.11.2012)

The HS comments sections seemed to attract users from around the country and with different opinions about Talvivaara and the industry. The discussions included local, regional and national perspectives and issues, and users aligned with these levels, explicitly or implicitly. Users also constructed their own relationships with the incidents as outsiders or insiders (e.g. Comment 21).

> COMMENT 19: Luckily the operation of Talvivaara ends here, this is what all of us sane people from Kainuu have been waiting for. It's worth remembering that most of the people from Kainuu do not work in Talvivaara. […] (HS, 9.11.2012)

> COMMENT 20: Great, Talvivaara is now closed for good, this is what all of us sane people from Kainuu have been waiting for a long time. It's worth remembering that most of the people from Kainuu do not work in Talvivaara and get no profit from it […] (KS, 9.11.2012)

> COMMENT 21: […] If I was a local person, I would be happy! […] (HS, 9.11.2012)

Conclusions and Discussion

This study is focused on a certain time, context and incident. A singular researcher conducted the main analysis, so it should be understood as one interpretation of a specific theoretical framework. Additionally, the pre-analysis included judgments by the researcher concerning, for example, whether or not a phrase is actually place-related in relation to the study's theoretical setting (i.e. "a workplace in general"). In addition, the categorisation could have been completed in other ways, and place and related concepts include several dimensions not discussed or examined in this article.

The most significant exclusion was made in relation to news articles. Here, the role of the news articles was understood as in providing and improving opportunities for discussions (c.f., Dewey [[1927] 1954]). A rich volume of extant research details how news and news organisations, especially local and regional newspapers, build their roles in relation to place and geography (e.g. Hess 2012; Hujanen 2000; Mersey 2009; Nygren, Leckner, and Tenor 2017), and how the media participates in geographical imaginations (e.g. Nikunen 2018). In this study, the focus has been on user participation in geographically anchored media structures—a perspective rarely studied to date.

Five main conclusions can be drawn from the analysis:

(1)   Users positioned themselves relative to others according to both geographical places (e.g. periphery versus metropolitan area) and shared issues (e.g. against the mine or in favour). The geographical placement had several functions: it produced certain local expertise, provided a certain role (e.g. victim) in the discussion and defined the discussion and shared issues in the axis of local–regional–national.

(2)   Incidents and consequences in specific locations elicited the significant roles of insider and outsider, based on the traditional geographical setting and in relation to the actual case.

(3)   The issues and questions discussed differed in relation to geographical setting. For example, outsiders, especially HS users, referred to the environmental effects generally, and discussed the leak as a national matter of shared values. Conversely, SL and KS users referred to nearby areas and specific places. They discussed the Talvivaara case in detail and as more concrete issue.

(4)   The placements and the place-related roles related to both individual and shared identities. In SL, and especially KS, comment threads, regional identity was also a pivotal issue and defined mainly in relation to the contradiction between employment and environmental values. In these debates, identity was based on home and residency, reflecting the need to defend identity-related meaningful places and values. More cosmopolitan identities stood out mainly in HS comments.

(5)   The geographically anchored media structure was the core of public discussions, and users from around the country participated in discussions in all three public arenas.

In relation to RQ1a, the analysis shows that online users, especially those of local and regional papers, related strongly to traditional geographically anchored media structures, which had a great effect on their discussions. Furthermore, in relation to RQ1b, the analysis revealed that comments sections seemed to represent new unique public arenas for participation and discussions of shared issues in a public sphere, including the (old/traditional) context of local, regional or national connections.

In this study, the public sphere is conceptualised as a realm for public discussions of shared issues in public arenas. In this way, we can recognise several public spheres on the local–regional–national axis. These spheres differ in participants, their roles, locations and issues—the who, what role, where and about what—strongly defined by geography. The spheres are somewhat layered, yet also independent of one another. For example, the national media, like HS (and most TV channels), represents the national public arenas, discussions and views of the Talvivaara issue. Together with other national public arenas, such as Twitter, they constitute a (conceptual) national public sphere. The local public sphere is a part of this, yet also highly independent, with local newspaper and other arenas, discussions and more defined issues.

These connections and disconnections among spheres are notable in relation to theories on public spheres, especially Dewey's ([1927] 1954), who believed in the democratic potency of small local communities. The analysis does not suggest "better" or more vivid public participation or public sphere at the local level compared to the other two, but we can speculate that the local newspapers work as important forums for locally defined shared questions and user participation, and might form the main public arena in the local public sphere. As the context of public discussions and issues widens, this importance might not be discerned. These hypotheses provide interesting perspectives for future research.

The meaning of comments sections as public arenas within geographically anchored media should not be underestimated. They strengthen users' place-related bonds and identities, provide possibilities for participation and discussions of shared issues and values in a mass media context and keep the media at the core of these actions and processes. Previous research on online comments has shown that users have several goals and motives (Kangaspunta 2018b; Springer, Engelmann, and Pfaffinger 2015), they can recognise their role in public discussions, they diversify discussions of issues and they position themselves for dialogue with actors talking in the news articles (Kangaspunta 2016; 2018a; 2018b). Worryingly, the Finnish media logic is changing, and this form of user participation is decreasing. The use of paywall systems has deflated the number of online readers, and the popularity of comments sections that are "only for subscribers" is minimal, especially in local and regional newspapers. Additionally, news articles are shared and discussed more and more on social media platforms (instead of newspapers' own websites). It is possible that, if and when users' discussions move away from the mass media platforms, they will regress and lose relevance as parts of the public spheres, and users' participation will be understood increasingly as a secondary role in public discussions.

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NOTES

1. The nature of this public sphere could be understood as, for example, digital, virtual (Papacharissi 2002) or mediated (Nieminen 2004b), or in relation to Habermas's (see, e.g., [1991]) ideas of the (normative and) deliberative public sphere. However, in the limits of this article, the study neither participates in these broad theoretical discussion nor the challenging theories of counterpublics (Fraser 1992) or the agonistic model of democracy (Mouffe 1999).
2. The terms "reader" and "audience" are avoided because they presuppose reading the news before leaving a comment. Even though people usually read before participating in the comments sections, it is also possible to read only the headlines and/or other comments. For this reason, the term "user," referring to people using the newspapers for several purposes, is preferred.
3. Translated by the author, in the future, "transl."
4. Public arenas have been understood in many ways. A typical discourse connects the public arena and public sphere, but the public sphere is now seen as an arena. However, public arenas have also been conceptualised on their own. For example, Koivunen and Lehtonen (2005) see them from the perspective of public addresses—who is addressing whom, where and about what. Nieminen (2004b, 9), however, sees public arenas "separated by their subject issues and developmental histories," including the

"economy, politics, culture, social life (human interests), public (official) information, enter-
tainment, advertisements, etc."

5. More closely, Toepfl and Piwoni (2015, 9) suggest three required criteria for a public
    (sphere) to emerge: a) "the communicative spaces within which a public sphere operates";
    b) "the common discursive patterns that distinguish a public sphere"; and c) "the partici-
    pants who constitute a public sphere, both as speakers and as attentive audiences."
6. The material consists only of comments on news articles, not ones on editorials or
    columns. This exclusion was made to avoid genre-related differences in the material
    and to keep the data consistent. It is possible that people comment differently on
    opinion-driven content than on more neutrally understood news.
7. All users' comments were translated by the author, mainly using their original spelling,
    including errata.
8. "Ring 3" refers to Ring Road 3, Kehä III in Finnish, which is the outer ring road surrounding
    Helsinki's metropolitan area. The phrase "ring 3" is commonly used in debates between
    those in the capital area and those elsewhere in Finland, particularly northern Finland.

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