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## External Interference in a Hybrid Media Environment

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary journalists face a multitude of external pressures and threats, ranging from political and commercial interference to online harassment and increasing anti-press hostility. This empirical article examines how the hybridization of the media environment is reflected in journalists' experiences of external interference. The article also explores the factors in journalists' working environment that support their ability to maintain their external autonomy against interference. The article is based on an applied thematic analysis of 31 semi-structured interviews with Finnish journalists supplemented by 4 background interviews with organizational stakeholders. Four major developments were identified in the analysis: (1) a proliferation of publicity control, (2) an increasingly contested public sphere, (3) societal and political polarization, and (4) the personalization of journalism. The autonomy of journalism was supported by a combination of (1) journalistic professionalism, (2) internal confidence within journalistic organizations, and (3) communication and support measures. The findings suggest that the hybridization of the media environment has intensified the external interference and pressure journalists encounter in their work. These, in turn, increase the workload and mental strain related to journalistic work, having the potential to cause fatigue, chilling effects, and self-censorship in the long run.

### KEYWORDS

Autonomy; harassment; hybridity; interference; intimidation; journalism (profession)

## Introduction

The transition to the contemporary networked communication environment has had a significant economic and cultural impact on journalism and the conditions in which journalists conduct their work (Nygren, Dobek-Ostrowska, and Anikina 2015, 79). The authority and power of traditional media actors are being restructured, and the digitalization and proliferation of online communication has provided unprecedented possibilities for individuals and societal actors to participate in creating, steering, and manipulating information flows (Chadwick 2017, 4–5). Mediatization of society has complicated and blurred the distinctions between reality and media representations of reality, and between fact and fiction (Hjarvard 2008, 111–112). For social actors and institutions, these transformations have highlighted the importance of constructing and controlling their representations in both interactive

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and mass media (Hjarvard 2008; Laaksonen 2017). These developments have gone hand in hand with concerns about polarization and fragmentation in the public sphere and their consequences for democracy (Van Aelst et al. 2017).

Amid these transformations, journalism as an institution faces new challenges. Trust in news media is declining and polarizing along political lines (e.g., Reuters Institute 2019, 20–21). The rise of right-wing populism has propelled anti-press sentiments into the political mainstream, leading to a global surge in harassment and public demonization of journalists (Waisbord 2020a, 7–8; Hameleers 2020). The capture of news media by governments and businesses, often working together, has become a widely used tool for influencing and steering public opinion and perspective (Schiffrin 2018). Simultaneously, journalism has suffered a substantial decrease in subscriptions and advertising revenue, reducing the financial resources available (Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019, 1088–1092). Resources allocated to communications and public relations (PR) have steadily increased, highlighting the growing disparity between journalism and the communications industry (e.g., Jackson and Moloney 2016).

Despite these challenges, journalism has managed to maintain its position as an important arena of public debate and provider of societal information. Contributing factors include the professional ideology of journalism, its observed prestige, and its ability to create a collective public forum for diverse interests (Waisbord 2013; Luostarinen 1994, 28–29). Due to journalism's perceived autonomy, audience expectations are radically different from those for, say, advertising or political communication, which are fundamentally recognized as partisan and persuasive forms of communication (Kunelius 2003, 23). The benefits of being able to steer or influence journalism to one's benefit or strategically silence it can, therefore, be significant for external actors (Luostarinen 1994, 53–56; Schiffrin 2018).

However, external threats and challenges to journalism's autonomy have been severely understudied in the context of Western countries with high press freedom, where there has existed a tendency to take journalistic autonomy and the physical and mental safety of journalists for granted (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 134; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016, 880–881). This article examines empirically how the hybridization of the media environment has affected external pressures and threats from the perspective of Finnish legacy media journalists. The article also explores features that journalists consider crucial to their ability to resist the effects of external interference. By using Finland as an example, this article examines external interference and its implications in a democratic and stable European country with strong safeguards for media autonomy, effectively bridging gaps in previous research.

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How is the hybridization of the media environment reflected in journalists' experiences of external interference?

RQ2: What factors in journalists' working environment support their ability to maintain their external autonomy against interference?

This article represents qualitative component of a mixed-methods study exploring external interference in Finnish journalism. The quantitative findings concerning the prevalence, methods, and implications of external interference are presented in previous publications (Hiltunen 2019; Hiltunen and Suuronen 2019, 2020).

## Theoretical Framework and Key Concepts

### *Hybrid Media Environment*

This article steers away from a media systemic approach to hybridity and instead opts to regard media hybridity as an assemblage of features brought on and intensified by technological and social transformations. The defining element of hybridity is the interplay between older and newer, characterized by co-dependency and constant adaptation (Chadwick 2017, 4–5). Reflecting this, I do not argue that methods of external interference or factors supporting journalists' autonomy discussed in this article are necessarily something novel. However, in order to understand their current manifestations and significance, we need to consider how the features of contemporary hybrid media environment have transformed them (cf. Gulyas 2017, 886–887). Adopting the hybrid media environment as a framework for research is, therefore, an effort to address the rapid changes that have altered the way in which journalism is produced, distributed, and received and the role it plays in contemporary society (Gulyas 2017, 885–886).

In light of previous literature (Chadwick 2017; Gulyas 2017; Laaksonen 2017; Blach-Ørsten, Eberholst, and Burkal 2017; Anderson 2013), I ground my analysis on three features of the hybrid media environment I consider crucial for understanding contemporary manifestations of external interference: increased complexity, the blurring of boundaries and the diffusion of power.

*Increased complexity* refers to the increased opportunities for public expression and the construction of media publicity. Due to digitalization and the proliferation of online media platforms (Blach-Ørsten, Eberholst, and Burkal 2017, 336), there has been a transition from the practical monopolies of traditional mass media to a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al. 2017). The once relatively stable and commonly shared public sphere within the legacy media is turning into a mosaic comprising an ever-increasing number of smaller shards due to the multiplicity of media forms, outlets, and logics (Chadwick 2017, 25).

The *blurring of boundaries* highlights how the hybridization complicates the traditional distinctions and positions. Due to increased opportunities for public expression, journalists have lost their role as dominant gatekeepers of the public sphere, and the power of one-way mass media has given way to the proliferation of interactive, participatory, and self-organized forms of media and communication (Anderson 2013; Ahva 2017). This has made it difficult to draw clear-cut separations between producers and receivers, as there are unprecedentedly low barriers of access and increasing possibilities to address the public directly (Bruns 2007). Simultaneously, hybridity contributes to the shifting boundaries between public and private and professional and personal by introducing digital media spheres that occupy the liminal spaces in between and encourage communication crossing these lines (e.g., Jameson 2014).

Due to the increased complexity and blurring boundaries, the *power to influence representations, frames, and interpretations in public spheres is diffusing*. As actors ranging from individuals to networked activists to institutions, corporations and states have manifold ways to construct, steer and contest representations publicly and in real time, the intensity and number of actors involved in these processes are unparalleled compared to the analog era (Chadwick 2017). While representations produced by legacy media journalism are still influential, they are debated, adapted, and challenged in new ways in

public, and journalism in turn often taps into representations circling in digital media spheres (Chadwick 2017; Laaksonen 2017). In this environment, power and representations are increasingly unstable, as they are formed, steered, and fought over by a myriad of voices amid constant hybrid cacophony (Laaksonen 2017).

The aim of this article is to explore how legacy media journalists' aspirations for external autonomy and independent reporting are being challenged within contemporary hybrid environment characterized by ever-increasing complexity, dissolution of boundaries and dispersing power.

### ***Journalistic Autonomy***

Autonomy has been considered the fundamental building block of modern journalism (Deuze 2005) and can be understood as the professional aspiration of journalists to protect their work from any attempts at manipulation or interference (Kunelius 2003, 23). Autonomous position has been considered critical for the democratic role of journalism, enabling it to publicly report and discuss matters considered disconcerting by politicians and other powerful societal actors (Luostarinen 1994).

Studies typically separate two analytical dimensions of journalistic autonomy: external and internal (Nygren, Dobek-Ostrowska, and Anikina 2015, 80–81). The external dimension refers to the societal and political autonomy of journalism and the extent to which journalists are protected from forces external to journalistic organizations. The internal dimension highlights the extent to which journalists can make their decisions free from management pressures and forces inside media outlets (Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 135). This article focuses on the external dimension of autonomy and examines methods that outside actors utilize when trying to transgress the external boundaries of journalistic autonomy.

Critical scholars, like Schudson (2005), have pointed out that the significance of autonomy in journalism can be problematized and too much autonomy could actually be harmful for the democratic mission of journalism. If journalism becomes too elitist, insular, and detached from the public and the society, there is a risk of journalism losing its relevance and democratic potential. However, I disagree with the notion that vulnerability to external pressures is needed to keep journalism responsive to society at large (Schudson 2005, 220–221), as the traditional journalistic ideals emphasizing informing the public and cultivating democratic participation act to keep journalism attuned to its democratic role in society. While I agree with the notion that “journalistic autonomy cannot be a value for its own sake” (Schudson 2005, 222), I perceive autonomy as necessary requirement for journalism to be able to fulfill its democratic role representing the collective interests of the public instead of being harnessed to serve narrow partisan ones (Kunelius 2003, 24–25). Therefore, I argue that the concept of autonomy is especially suitable for an empirical study focusing on methods that actively aim to influence how journalistic work is conducted and what information it conveys to the public.

### ***External and Mixed Interference***

For this article, *external interference* is defined broadly as all active and/or invasive methods actors external to journalistic organizations use to interfere in the journalistic process and to influence journalists and editorial content (see also Luostarinen 1994;

Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Methods of external interference can also be used strategically to induce a chilling effect and self-censorship among journalists with the aim of influencing journalism in the future (see Clark and Grech 2017).

*Mixed interference*, defined as situations in which external interference is transmitted internally through a media organization's chain of command, is also included within the scope of the study (Hemánus 1983, 192; Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, and Demeter 2020; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019).

The definition of external interference used in this article emphasizes the individual experience and perspective of journalists, thus rendering the social phenomenon accessible to the researcher (see Reich and Hanitzsch 2013, 136). By using this type of broad definition, it is possible to simultaneously study low-intensity interference alongside more intrusive and aggressive methods, allowing for a nuanced overall picture of the phenomenon. This definition, however, excludes standard PR activities such as press releases and press conferences, information subsidies, and other similar agenda-building efforts (Mykkänen and Ikonen 2019). While one can argue that these practices can have a significant impact on journalistic content, these activities do not actively limit or violate the external autonomy of journalism because the decision whether to engage with PR activities and material remains with the journalists. Therefore, they are not included within the scope of this study.

## Context: Journalistic Culture in Finland

Finland, like other Nordic countries, ranks very high in measures of media freedom. Systemic factors supporting media autonomy in Finland include the strong position of public service broadcast media, high newspaper circulation, high levels of professionalism, institutional self-regulation via an independent press council, and low political parallelism in the media (Nord 2008). These are reflected in the journalistic culture; Finnish journalists report a high degree of perceived professional autonomy and seem to regard themselves as distant from direct political, government, and business influences (Väliverronen, Ahva, and Pöyhtäri 2016).

Comparatively, Finnish journalists feel less economic pressure than journalists in non-Nordic countries where press freedom is high do, indicating that the influence of commercialization and growing competitiveness are moderated by the traditions and structural particularities of the Nordic media system (Ahva et al. 2017, 607). When compared to other Nordic countries, however, Finnish and Danish journalists reported significantly more political influence in their work (Ahva et al. 2017, 607).

While trust in the news media has remained relatively high in Finland (Reuters Institute 2019, 20–21), there is evidence of a gradual decline and polarization along partisan lines (Matikainen et al. 2020; Sivonen and Saarinen 2018).

## Material and Method

This article is based on a qualitative analysis of 31 semi-structured one-on-one interviews conducted with Finnish journalists. To further contextualize the findings, four background interviews were conducted at a later stage of the study with the chairpersons from *the Union of Journalists in Finland*, *the Finnish Association of Editors*, and *The Council for Mass Media in Finland*, and with the Head of Journalistic Standards and Ethics of the

Finnish Broadcasting Company (*Yleisradio Oy*). All the interviews were conducted between January 2018 and December 2019 and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### Sample and Procedure

For the journalist interviews, the study combined critical case sampling ( $n = 15$ ) with maximum variety sampling ( $n = 16$ ) (Patton 1990, 172–176). The critical case sample consisted of 15 interviews with high-profile Finnish journalists reporting on topics identified as prone to external interference and pressure such as politics, business, crime, immigration, and investigative reporting (c.f. Parker 2015, 96–99). The maximum variety sample comprised 16 journalists who, in the 2017 research survey (Hiltunen 2019), expressed their interest in participating in a follow-up interview. The sampling processes were guided by the aim of maximizing variance among the interviewees, with journalists from different demographics, types of employment, occupational positions, media outlets, and specializations represented in the sample. One contacted journalist declined to participate in the study due to personal reasons.

The combination of sampling methods contributed a rich and diverse set of material (Patton 1990, 185–186). However, due to the slant towards journalists who presumably encounter external interference the most, the sample is not representative in relation to the whole population. The findings should be, therefore, regarded as illustrative, highlighting phenomena that may gradually become more commonplace among all Finnish journalists.

The key demographic characteristics of the sample are illustrated in Table 1.

The age range of interviewees varied from 27 to 65 years, with the average age being 44 years. The journalistic work experience of the interviewees ranged from 8 years to 42 years, with the average work experience being 21 years. Of the interviewees, 22 had salaried positions in media outlets and 7 worked as freelancers. One interviewee had a combination of employment types and one had recently switched careers. The employing media outlets of the salaried journalists are illustrated in Table 2.

Of the semi-structured interviews, 24 were conducted using Skype or similar voice-over-internet-protocol software with video connections and 7 were conducted face-to-face. The length of the interviews varied from 43 min to 121 min, with the average length being 73 min.

### Interview Guide

The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A) addressed three topic areas: (1) personal experiences of external interference, (2) reactions to external interference, and (3) perceptions of how external interference affects journalistic work and profession.

**Table 1.** Key demographic features of the interview sample ( $n = 31$ ).

Gender	<i>n</i>	Education	<i>n</i>	Occupational position	<i>n</i>
Female	18	Master's degree or higher academic degree	14	Editor-in-chief	3
Male	13	Bachelor's degree	3	Managing editor	4
		University of applied sciences degree	4	Producer	1
		University studies without a degree	4	Special reporter	9
		Upper secondary school degree	4	Reporter	14
		Vocational degree	2		

**Table 2.** Employing media outlets of salaried journalists ( $n = 22$ ).

Media outlet	$n$
National newspaper	3
Public broadcasting	3
Tabloid newspaper	3
Semi-local newspaper	3
Local newspaper	3
Magazine	3
Regional newspaper	2
Commercial broadcasting	1
News agency	1

The flexible structure of the interviews made it possible to emphasize various aspects of interference with different interviewees, producing an information-rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives (Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin 2009). Because the subject matter can be considered sensitive the material has been used anonymously, with minimal identifying features.

### **Coding and Analysis**

The research follows the sociological tradition of situating texts as proxies for experience, regarding them as representations of individuals' perceptions, feelings, knowledge, and behavior (Bernard and Ryan 1998). The material was analyzed using inductive applied thematic analysis with the aim of identifying both implicit and explicit ideas within it and grouping together interrelated ideas as themes (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 2012). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software ATLAS.ti 8 was used in the process.

The material was coded and analyzed in two rounds. In the first round, a descriptive coding strategy was used to develop initial codes (Saldaña 2013, 87–91). By examining and cataloging how journalists reflected on their experiences, feelings, and perceptions, the material was condensed, and an initial classification was constructed. The second round employed pattern coding to explore commonalities, differences, and relationships between the codes, and interrelated elements were combined (Saldaña 2013, 209–213). By merging related elements, it was possible to refine the material into themes. As these themes pointed to specific developments within the working environment of journalists, the concept of a hybrid media environment was chosen as a framework for the analysis. The findings are presented below, with extracts from the interviews translated by the author used to illustrate how interviewees reflected on the research themes.

## **Findings**

### **Hybridization of the Media Environment**

When comparing the experiences of interference with the aspects of hybridization, four major developments were identified: (1) a proliferation of publicity control, (2) an increasingly contested public sphere, (3) political and social polarization, and (4) personalization of journalism.

### *Proliferation of Publicity Control*

In a complex communication environment in which both the interactive and mass media have become more ubiquitous and socially influential, societal actors spend increasing amounts of resources on constructing and controlling their media presence and representations (Hjarvard 2008; Laaksonen 2017). The interviews indicate that these efforts are reflected in the way in which various actors interacted with journalists and journalism.

For journalists, these aspirations manifested as increased efforts to influence and control journalistic processes and their outcomes. Interviewed journalists described how, in addition to utilizing standard PR and lobbying strategies (see Mykkänen and Ikonen 2019) communications professionals actively interfered in the conduct of journalism by controlling access to sources and information, monitoring and intervening in interviews, and contacting and pressuring journalists on behalf of their clients. Journalists also reported communications professionals putting out untruthful public statements disputing their stories and actively contacting their superiors to discredit their stories and sources.

These practices were described as seeping from corporations into public governance. The quotation below shows how one investigative journalist perceives the influx of business communications practices into public administration:

From my perspective, they have started to employ a very similar repertoire of tricks [...] they have simply copied what the businesses are doing without giving any thought to whether good governmental communication should somehow be different from corporate PR. (Interview 28)

Efforts to protect their public image were also cited as reasons for government officials' occasional reluctance to provide public information and documents to journalists, effectively violating the Finnish legislation regarding the openness of government activities. Journalists encountered this especially when the information could be considered disconcerting for the authorities or parties close to them.

Another symptom of increased publicity control was the observed proliferation of threats invoking legal repercussions. While the interviewees perceived the majority of these to be unfounded and made only to pressure and intimidate, even the possibility of lengthy, laborious, and time-consuming legal processes was often enough to introduce additional workload and mental strain into journalistic activities.

The increased efforts at interfering in journalistic processes highlight how autonomous journalism can be perceived as a reputational risk in the hybrid media environment. Because societal actors have multiple communication channels at their own disposal and invest more and more resources in constructing their public representation and promoting their interests through communicational activities (Laaksonen 2017), independent journalism can be seen more as a hazard than a benefit, from the actors' perspective.

### *Increasingly Contested Public Sphere*

While the representations produced by journalism have always been a subject of contest and debate, interviewees perceived the conflicts in the public sphere as having intensified and as brought more directly to journalists (see also Post and Kepplinger 2019; Craft, Vos, and Wolfgang 2016). Waisbord (2020a, 3) states that in the analog era, opportunities for public expression were limited due to higher barriers to access and the dominant position

of the press as a gatekeeper. Groups willing to interfere with journalism or challenge its representations were forced to use resource-intensive, time-consuming, and laborious tactics (Waisbord 2020a, 3). However, the proliferation of digital media platforms and of possibilities for interaction have made it easy to construct networks that form their own alternative or counter publics and to engage in reflexive political action seeking to influence mainstream journalism (Häyhtiö and Rinne 2009; Hatakka 2019; Noppari, Hiltunen, and Ahva 2019).

Several interviewees reported experiences of coordinated interference by groups and networks fitting this description and promoting, for example, anti-vaccination, anti-immigration or pro-Russia views. This interference included verbal abuse, verbal threats, orchestrated public defamation and discrediting, and various forms of harassment. In addition, these groups utilized social media and other online platforms to publicly fan collective aggression toward journalists (see also Waisbord 2020b). The explicit goal was to incite other members of the audience to participate in harassing behaviors, effectively crowdsourcing the harassment (Bartlett and Chan 2020). Journalists targeted with this kind of interference experienced it as explicit effort to silence them, as illustrated by the quote below:

What they are hoping to accomplish is for me not to cover these issues [...] As I am one of the few journalists that actively follows this field in Finland, getting me to stop would be a pretty huge victory for them. (Interview 31)

While only few interviewees explicitly mentioned engaging in self-censorship or brought up other direct effects on their journalism caused by harassment, most of them reported negative psychological effects because of it. While harassment did not necessarily have a direct effect on their professional journalistic conduct, it created an additional stressor and affected their physical and mental well-being. In the quote below, a journalist who had experienced long-term harassment while working in an editorial role recounts their experience of the psychological effects:

I was living under a constant threat of psychological violence. I always feared what they were going to come up with next [...] In a way, the most serious consequences are inside your own head [...] you start to contemplate all kinds of possibilities. (Interview 26)

### ***Societal and Political Polarization***

Societal and political polarization were identified by the interviewees as both symptoms and driving forces of the erosion of public trust in journalism, going hand in hand with increasingly contested and fragmented public sphere (see also Matikainen et al. 2020, 80–81; Sivonen and Saarinen 2018; Noppari, Hiltunen, and Ahva 2019, 33–34). Political populism was often explicitly identified as the main catalyst for polarization, creating divisions and explicitly inciting mistrust against journalism as an institution (see Waisbord 2020a, 7–8; Hameleers 2020). This was considered a new feature in the Finnish public sphere, as one managing editor notes:

[...] political polarization has become evident [...] certain rifts relate to populist politics and a growing nationalist, anti-immigration ethos, as well as the rise of simplified truths [...] they are adapting methods that have been internationally successful and transferring them to the Finnish context, which is a somewhat new thing for a country with a long tradition of consensus. (Interview 22)

Polarization was perceived contributing to situations in which journalists felt that they were forcibly dragged into societal struggles (see Ojala and Pöyhtäri 2018). Instead of seeing journalism as neutral and detached, various actors had a tendency to blame journalism for taking sides, thus justifying the view of journalists as “fair game” for interference and attacks. This was regarded as extremely unfair by journalists, who highlighted their commitment to traditional professional values of accuracy and balanced reporting. This rift in perceptions illustrates contestation over the professional role of journalists as journalism is increasingly seen as a politicized practice (Ojala and Pöyhtäri 2018, 169). Below, a special reporter describes their perspective on the matter:

Nowadays, it feels like many people are under impression that [...] journalists always have some kind of an agenda and that we are somehow against ordinary people. Many people share that kind of notion. I find that extremely scary. (Interview 3)

While the interviewees did not generally observe a dramatic change in the general public, they felt that individuals and groups engaging in antagonistic language and extremist views had become more active and visible due to the possibilities provided by the hybrid media environment. For journalists, polarization was manifested by an increasingly aggressive public discourse and hostile attitudes toward journalism and journalists. Interviewees reported that this also contributed to the increased threat of disruption and verbal and physical aggression when reporting from the field. A few had personal experiences of physical threats and violence related to hostility toward the media.

### *Personalization of Journalism*

Most of the journalists expressed concern about the dissolution of the professional and private roles of the journalist from the audience perspective. They felt that the hybrid media environment is characterized by personalization; personal visibility of journalists is increasing, and public attention is shifting away from journalism toward the journalists doing the reporting (see also Waisbord 2020b, 6–8).

Due to the increased contestation and polarization, personalization led to situations in which individual journalists started to symbolize societal causes in the eyes of the public. This illustrates how the public image of journalists is increasingly shaped by multiple actors and interactions in the hybrid media sphere. While this symbolization can be beneficial for journalists when building their professional recognition, it also dissolves the boundaries between journalists, activists, and other public voices. Below a freelance reporter reflects on how the public perception of their professional brand has affected their career but also the interference directed at them:

I have not planned it. On the contrary [...] but of course I have benefited from my brand and the recognition [...] But if there is a considerable group of people that find this type of reporter and this type of public voice and figure important, not only in a journalistic sense but also in the sense of public discussion, there is usually also a flip side. Because figures like that always have a counterweight and a counterforce. (Interview 27)

For journalists working with sensitive topics, personalization placed new pressures on how they performed, not only in their professional but also in their personal lives, because anything from their personal history could be used to discredit or defame them (cf. Revers 2017, 165–166). The combination of personalization and accessibility

to information online has increased the need for journalists to think ahead and consider their personal information and digital footprints more carefully (Waisbord 2020a, 3–4). Interviewees described how personalization led to an increase in harassment targeting the private personas of journalists as well as defamation campaigns featuring elements of character assassination (see also Clark and Horsley 2020, 47–51). Most of the interviewees expressed concerns over personal attacks becoming more widespread, and several brought up examples of how they had been used as a means of psychological pressure toward them. Some pointed out how these effects were made worse by the public visibility of insults and defamation online. Below, an editor-in-chief describes the difference between the experience of being targeted with personal attacks and other types of interference:

When they target your personal characteristics instead of your professional role [...] you are left quite unarmed. If they attack my professional self, I have my professional role and professional defenses in place, but when they attack my persona, there really is nothing. (Interview 6)

Personalization was also connected to a variety of physical threats. Interviewees reported experiences of stalking and situations featuring threats of impulsive violence as a result of people recognizing them in public.

Interviewees' general attitudes toward personalization and public brand-building were divided. Several of them brought up positive effects, while others explicitly rejected any additional visibility or audience interaction. Despite these differences, interviewed journalists shared a unanimous position that while their journalistic work could justifiably be subjected to harsh public criticism, their private lives were not fair game for similar treatment. However, several of them pointed out that in the contemporary communication environment, the decision regarding personal publicity was not entirely up to journalists themselves. Other actors can direct unwanted public attention onto journalists' private personas, effectively forcing them into the limelight (see also Waisbord 2020b, 1–2).

### ***Factors Supporting Journalists' Professional Autonomy Against External Interference***

When examining the factors that support the autonomy of journalists against external interference, three main themes were identified: (1) journalistic professionalism, (2) internal confidence within journalistic organizations, and (3) communication and support measures. While these are examined separately here, in reality they are fundamentally intertwined and build upon each other. This separation should therefore be understood only as an analytical necessity.

Although freelancers are not formally part of journalistic organizations, their interviews indicated almost identical views on factors supporting their journalistic autonomy. Therefore, the concept of journalistic organization used refers to media outlets of both salaried employees and freelancers alike.

#### ***Journalistic Professionalism***

When discussing factors supporting journalistic autonomy against external interference, journalists highlighted the paramount importance of journalistic professionalism. On

the basis of Bourdieu's field theory (1993), Waisbord (2013, 10–13) defined journalists' ability to set up boundaries, exercise control, and force their professional logics over the social field of journalism as the central features of the journalistic profession. As social fields are characterized by constant interaction, the journalistic profession is engaged in continuous boundary work (Bourdieu 1984; Revers 2017) to negotiate its relations to fields like politics and economy and to guard journalistic logic from their encroachment (see also Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, and Demeter 2020; Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019).

Previous studies have identified a strong commitment to professionalism, journalism ethics, and to the role of a detached and objective observer as characteristic of Finnish journalism culture (e.g., Välvirronen, Ahva, and Pöyhtäri 2016; Reunanen and Koljonen 2014). These notions were supported by the interview material; journalists expressed a strong desire to uphold these commitments and perceived resistance to external influence as an important aspect of their work. Highlighting these commitments can also be considered an effort to reinforce the boundaries between journalism and other media content and between professional journalists and actors like bloggers and social media activists (cf. Anderson 2013, 98).

Instead of targeting journalists directly, external actors often aim to interfere by contacting journalists' superiors or the owners of their media outlet (see also Goyanes and Rodríguez-Castro 2019). Interviewees, therefore, emphasized the importance of shared professional principles. When everyone in the journalistic organization was committed to common professional values and ideals, journalists could rely on their editors and the owners not to give in to any external interference and uphold the firewall between editorial and advertising content (cf. Duffy and Cheng 2020). This made it possible for journalists to work adhering to their professional guidelines and ensured the predictability of editorial decisions. Shared professional commitment was also seen as important in preventing the formation of so-called "parallel newsrooms," internal cliques of journalists willing to collaborate with external actors (Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, and Demeter 2020, 7).

Journalists voiced explicit disappointment in cases where they felt that their professional aspirations were not shared or supported by their journalistic organizations. These incidents typically took form of mixed interference: external pressure cascaded through editors perceived as sympathetic to external actors' interests (Hemánus 1983, 192; Kuutti 1995, 246–250; Goyanes, Vaz-Álvarez, and Demeter 2020, 8–10). This highlights how one weak link in the organizational chain of command can nullify the efforts of resistance to external interference. Below, a reporter reflects on how the weak professional commitment of the editor-in-chief undermined the whole newsroom's aspiration for autonomy:

Our editor-in-chief is easily influenced [...] and by exploiting this, his contact circle can bring out their preferred topics, effectively bypassing normal journalistic procedures. [...] When your superior does not have a strong journalistic outlook, external actors are able to get the newspaper to serve their commercial interests more easily. (Interview 2)

The strong professional commitment was also evidenced by reports from several interviewees who had continued their work despite being targeted with aggressive harassment and interference. Previous research has demonstrated how interference and attacks against their work can lead to increased defiance, resilience, and determination among

journalists (Clark and Horsley 2020; Post and Kepplinger 2019; Clark and Grech 2017). However, Parker (2015, 132–133) notes that strong occupational commitment can be a double-edged sword because people who feel a calling to their work are also more likely to make sacrifices for their jobs. Journalists subscribing to a strong professional identity may therefore be more ready to prioritize their occupational commitment over their individual well-being (see Clark and Horsley 2020, 82–84, 107–108). While this may mitigate the direct effects of external interference on journalism, it can simultaneously have serious detrimental consequences for individual journalists. In the quote below, a reporter reflects on how they manage the emotional toll of harassment by foregrounding their professional role:

They are trying to manipulate my emotions to prevent me from doing my job [...] but a professional journalist does not make any decisions on the basis of their feelings but according to journalistic guidelines [...] if they manage to distress me, I will process it in therapy rather than let it show in my work. I am trying to separate my own personal emotional life and my professional duties and rights in every possible way. (Interview 4)

### *Internal Confidence Within Journalistic Organizations*

When working in an environment characterized by increased external pressures, journalists see internal confidence within journalistic organizations as another factor that significantly supports their aspirations for professional autonomy. In journalistic organizations, internal confidence comprises multiple trust relationships: between reporters and managing editors, between managing editors and editors-in-chief, and between editors-in-chief and the board and the owners of the media outlet (Hiltunen and Suuronen 2020, 15).

According to the interviewees, the fostering of internal confidence made it easier to continue their work in times of heightened external pressure, echoing description of *editorial defense shield* by Revers (2017, 162–163). When faced with interference or threats, journalists could convey these to their editors, who then sprung to their defense, shielding journalists and their work (see also Kuutti 1995, 246). Naturally, this requires a strong two-way confidence between reporters and their superiors. Below, an investigative journalist describes how support from their superiors contributed to their ability to conduct their work when faced with external interference:

I have been fortunate with my superiors [...] They have stood between me and interference [...] they have said that I should just focus on my work and they will take care of all the correspondence and the fallout. (Interview 30)

However, if internal confidence faltered as a result of newsroom conflicts, it was not easily repaired. Interviewees who had worked in these types of conditions described long-lasting distrust resulting from incidents that had decreased their confidence in their organization. Below, a special reporter recalls their managing editors' reaction when their story was contested by a subject with high societal status. Eventually, the story in question proved accurate.

I have had such problems that I do not necessarily trust my managing editors. [...] I was so irritated by the speed with which my bosses believed I was wrong when someone with sufficient authority simply claimed so. [...] In my opinion, superiors should be able to consider various arguments and evidence, not just who is behind some claim. (Interview 13)

The significance of internal confidence was also highlighted when journalists were targeted with false claims and defamation aimed at influencing their professional and personal reputation (see Post and Kepplinger 2019, 2426). According to the journalists, the goal of these was often to diminish their professional recognition among their colleagues and make their work more difficult by labeling them as suspicious and problematic persons. These defamation efforts could target their employer, their superiors, and their colleagues simultaneously, testing the internal confidence of the whole organization. One special reporter described their experiences regarding these tactics and the role internal confidence plays in countering the effects:

My employer regularly receives things like diagnoses of my mental health and untruthful claims about what I have supposedly done [...] If everyone would not be completely convinced that these are blatant lies [...] it would take a tremendous amount of time to clear these things up. (Interview 3)

### *Communication and Support Measures*

Building on internal confidence, interviewees saw open communication and active support as crucial elements in countering the detrimental effects of external interference. When journalists felt that they could rely on the support of their superiors and employers, they were willing to report and openly discuss matters related to interference. At the opposite end of the spectrum, journalists who expressed mistrust tended to keep these incidents to themselves and mostly tried to deal with them on their own.

The analysis revealed striking differences in the perceived level of organizational support. Some journalists reported that their employers had gone to significant lengths to help them deal with external pressure or organized harassment, providing both material and mental support and explicitly communicating their commitment to supporting them. Others described how the lack of response from their superiors and employers had left them demoralized and unwilling to report any incidences of interference to them. Both salaried employees and freelancers reported occasionally having experienced insufficient organizational support. While freelancers highlighted how their detached position sometimes made communication and getting support difficult, salaried journalists typically saw the lack of support as symptomatic of problems in attitudes and personnel within the organization. Below, a salaried special reporter recounts how their employer's lack of response to their reports of online harassment and defamation had affected their perception of support:

I have not reported even half of it to my employer because I have noticed that it is not worth it given the lack of response [...] I do not have any reason to expect or assume that my employer would support me in these matters, so I do not even bother to try anymore. Instead, I will seek support elsewhere. (Interview 23)

Even if journalists are not personally targeted, they can form attitudes based on interference and harassment they see targeted at others (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020, 15–16). This so-called bystander effect ensures that support or the lack of it is easily perceived as communicational action by the employer. The interviews indicate that inconsistencies regarding the level of support and indeterminacy of response quickly undermined the perceived level of support. Additionally, interviewees were mindful of incidents in

which their colleagues or other journalists had been subjected to intimidation and harassment, often bringing them up in the interviews. Acts of public harassment, defamation, and intimidation targeting journalists can therefore be understood as strategic communicational actions intended to send a message not only to the direct target but also to their colleagues and the whole profession (see also Hiltunen 2019, 18).

External interference was also used as a means of delaying journalistic processes and publication of information (Hiltunen 2020). By presenting false claims and threats, the subjects of stories were occasionally able to sow discord among journalistic organizations, slowing down or halting journalistic processes. Interviewees provided several examples of how a culture of open communication had helped to alleviate these effects and ensured that journalists continued their work undisturbed. The quote by an investigative journalist below illustrates how intertwined journalistic professionalism, internal confidence, and communication and support are and how their combination makes it possible for journalists to work efficiently despite external pressure:

For a freelancer, it is also a question of time and money [...] With an inexperienced editor who is unaccustomed to dealing with pressure, it would take me days to convince them to run the story [...] but when you have an experienced investigative journalist as an editor, it is quick and easy for me to demonstrate what evidence we have and what we can say on that basis. Then, they can greenlight the story and take care of anyone trying to pressure us. (Interview 28)

## Discussion

The findings indicate that the hybridization of the media environment has intensified the external interference and pressure that journalists encounter in their work. The growing complexity and social influence of both interactive and mass media have increased efforts at aggressive publicity control that create friction in journalistic routines. Journalism and journalists are subjected to constant ideologically motivated scrutiny and attacks, as the proliferation of clashing representations, values and interpretations, and possibilities for participation feed the contestation and polarization of the public sphere. Furthermore, increasing online visibility, combined with the personalization of journalism and citizens' easy access to journalists, has contributed to the spread of phenomena like harassment, defamation, and intimidation, having detrimental effects on journalists' work and personal lives. While harassment and psychological violence targeting Finnish journalists were not completely absent in the past (see, e.g., Kuutti 1995, 242–246), the speed, intensity, and publicity of these phenomena have increased manifold in the contemporary hybrid media environment (see Waisbord 2020a, 3–4).

Despite the pressures brought on by the hybrid media environment, interviewees generally agreed that Finnish journalism has managed to maintain its external autonomy reasonably well. The findings highlight how professionalism and internal confidence act as mediating factors mitigating the direct effects of external interference on journalistic output (see also Clark and Horsley 2020, 77–82). Only a few interviewees had engaged in self-censorship and the majority said interference had no dramatic direct effects on their journalism. However, interviewees agreed on interference increasing the mental strain of their work and occasionally affecting their personal lives (see also Clark and Horsley 2020, 74–76; Clark and Grech 2017, 37–42). Some interviewees reported the need to take breaks or focus on less sensitive subjects after assignments that had

involved a substantial amount of interference, and a few mentioned having thought of leaving the profession due to constant pressure. The interviewee who had switched careers explicitly said that their experiences of harassment and the perceived lack of organizational support influenced their decision. The findings indicate that the accumulating effects of interference can become evident in the long run, because journalists may become tired or unwilling to continuously subject themselves to interference and pressure (see also Clark and Grech 2017, 62–63).

Interestingly, the factors supporting journalistic autonomy reported by the interviewees echo very traditional journalistic ideals. This may indicate that challenges posed by contemporary hybrid media environment have highlighted the importance of the fundamental elements of the profession. However, this can simultaneously reflect the difficulty of finding effective ways to deal with new manifestations of interference. Especially harassment and threats stemming from the audience and networked actors were perceived as something unpredictable and uncontrollable. Interviewees targeted by constant online harassment, defamation, and threats were often struggling to make sense of the situation and saw their employers as unable to protect them effectively from their impact. Post and Kepplinger (2019, 2437) state that audience hostility of the current intensity and reach is a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, it may be possible that journalists and journalistic organizations will eventually develop new routines and coping methods, becoming increasingly resilient in the future (Post and Kepplinger 2019, 2437). The same may be true for other types of interference intensified by the hybrid the media environment, as journalism can learn to adapt to and find new and effective ways to preserve its autonomy in this environment.

However, the opposite may also prove true. Interviewees raised concerns about diminishing resources, the polarization of trust in journalism, and the increasing competition between journalism and other media content in the hybrid media environment (see also Hiltunen 2020). Journalism has to face these challenges while undergoing structural changes regarding the traditional models and infrastructure of the business. The lack of resources increases the production pressures inside newsrooms, decreasing the journalists' opportunities for autonomous reporting and encouraging practices such as "churnalism", the abundant use of unchecked PR material (Davies 2008). Moreover, the deteriorating financial situation can make journalism increasingly vulnerable to economic and political interference because succumbing to these pressures can offer journalism commercial benefits (Schiffirin 2018; Clark and Horsley 2020, 97–99). Increasing attacks and audience hostility toward journalists can lead to "participation fatigue" and have the potential to drive women and minorities in particular away from journalism (Waisbord 2020b; Post and Kepplinger 2019, 2437). When the aforementioned developments are combined with the contested relevance of journalism in the hybrid media environment, the combination can deflate the public prestige and desirability of the journalistic profession. As a result, more journalists could become frustrated and disillusioned with the reality of the profession and seek alternative employment (c.f. Nölleke, Maeres, and Hanusch 2020).

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