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Boundaries in Motion? Finnish Political Journalists' External and Internal Boundary Work in a Time of Change

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ABSTRACT

This article utilizes Carlson and Lewis's (2019. "Boundary Work." In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, 2nd ed., edited by K. Wahl-Jorgensen, and T. Hanitzsch, 123–135. New York: Routledge) typology of journalistic boundary work to investigate Finnish political journalists' external boundaries (their relations to non-journalistic actors) and internal boundaries (their relations to other journalists) from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s. The study is motivated by the changes in journalism and politics that have challenged Finnish political journalists' working ways and position in newsrooms, and the earlier works by Kantola (2013. "From Gardeners to Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Liquid Ethos in Political Journalism." *Journalism* 14 (5): 606–626) and Väliverronen (2018. "More of the Same or a Different Breed Altogether? A National Comparison of Role Perceptions and Ethical Stances among Finnish Political Journalists." *Nordicom Review* 39 (1): 51–66) that indicate somewhat contrasting results about political journalists' boundaries. The two works are used for comparison in the analysis, which is based on semi-structured thematic interviews with 27 political journalists. The findings indicate growing uncertainty among Finnish political journalists. Their external boundaries are still negotiated mainly between elected institutional political actors and journalists, and structural dependencies favor attempts to reach mutual understanding. However, there has been more turbulence in their internal boundaries because of the increasing impact of other journalists on political journalism. Amongst political journalists, young reporters stand out: their relations to non-journalistic actors differ from their older colleagues, and their internal position has been affected most by the growing pressures in newsrooms.

KEYWORDS

Boundary work; external boundaries; internal boundaries; interviews; political journalists; Finland

Introduction

Boundary work has become a popular framework for exploring changes in journalism. The concept, from Gieryn's (1983) study on the legitimation of science, has mostly been deployed in journalism studies to investigate the profession's views of itself and its ways of working (Carlson and Lewis 2015; 2019). Many studies focus on external boundary

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work – how journalism as a profession distinguishes itself discursively from other professions and non-journalistic actors (Robinson 2010; Singer 2015). Others observe internal boundary work, or the discursive negotiations and differences between journalists (Zelizer 1992; Carpentier 2005; Wiik 2015).

Journalism's many transformations (Peters and Broersma 2013) have increased questions about its boundaries. There have been calls to expand the scope of boundary work research to understand better the impact of different actors and factors on journalism's development in different environments over time (Carlson and Lewis 2019). To plug some gaps in literature, this article investigates journalists' external and internal boundary work together and concentrates on a privileged group in Western journalism (Neveu 2002; Hovden 2016) – political journalists. The boundaries are observed at the national level in Finland where conditions for doing political journalism have been in flux (Kantola 2013; Niemi, Raunio, and Ruostetsaari 2017), creating potential for numerous instances of both external and internal boundary work.

A review of boundary work research introduces the topic, and it is followed by a description of historical developments in political communication and journalism in Finland. After a presentation of the research method and data, the results section explicates Finnish political journalists' main ways of external and internal boundary work. The concluding discussion summarizes the findings and considers ideas for further research.

Boundary Work and its Applications

Studies on boundary work emerged from the strand of sociology of professions that focuses on how professions discursively claim their position and maintain their authority to perform certain tasks for society (Gieryn 1983; Abbott 1988). Such questions have been particularly pertinent for journalism. Because journalism lacks many of the features of a classical profession (Abbott 1988; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996), it has to engage actively in boundary work to claim an authoritative position, maintain its status in the eyes of others, and solidify its position internally (Carlson and Lewis 2019).

The institutional-discursive approach by Gieryn (1983) is well represented in journalistic boundary work research. Scholars have investigated journalists' attempts to distinguish their profession from others (Deuze 2005; Anderson 2008) and their work from work done by non-journalistic actors like citizens (Lewis 2012; Tong 2015). Studies into internal boundary work have observed critical incidents (Zelizer 1992), in which journalists' questionable actions have prompted internal debate about the limits of acceptable journalistic behavior (Bishop 1999; Fakazis 2006). Such cases often lead to paradigm repair (Berkowitz 2000) whereby journalists attempt to preserve the unity of the profession. There is also a growing body of studies focusing on general discursive differences between journalists (Carpentier 2005; Hanitzsch 2007; Wiik 2015).

Boundary work studies have expanded in scope as transformations in journalism have spurred debate about the future of the profession and need for reform (Chadwick 2013; Waisbord 2013). Researchers have included journalists' actions (Domingo and Paterson 2011; Deuze and Marjoribanks 2009), material elements (Schmitz-Weiss and Domingo 2010; Anderson 2011), and other factors such as beat (Revers 2014) or location (Amado and Waisbord 2015) as constituents of boundary work. Moreover, within the discursive

sphere, Carlson (2016) has pointed out the need to understand boundary work more broadly as a metajournalistic discourse where the views of journalists and non-journalists – for instance, audiences (Banjac and Hanusch 2020) – combine to constitute suitable practices and limits for journalism.

These studies have helped establish a broader view of boundary work and necessitated new conceptualizations to enable a better understanding of its complexity. To this end, Carlson and Lewis (2019) have adapted Gieryn’s (1999) ideas to journalistic boundary work. Their analytical framework (see Table 1) consists of three different levels: *participants* (all actors who have with journalism to do), *practices* (all actions related to journalism), and *propositions* (all underlying ideals, norms and beliefs governing journalism). The framework is based on the premise that journalism and its boundaries are permanently contingent. Thus, boundary work entails constant struggles between different participants, practices and propositions for prominence and power in journalism. These struggles can lead to *expansion* (e.g., journalism accepts new practices), *expulsion* (e.g., some norm is rejected as a governing principle in journalism), or *protection of autonomy* (e.g., some non-journalistic actor is recognized as a threat to journalism).

The consequences of these struggles are often gradual changes over time. Describing and analysing these changes is crucial for understanding journalism and its evolution. Existing literature mainly focuses on Anglo-Saxon countries, particularly the United States, while developments elsewhere remain less studied. The institutional-discursive approach has dominated, and many of the studies conducted are case studies, in which the temporal aspect tends to be overlooked. (Carlson and Lewis 2019, 130–132.)

In Western journalism, political journalists have had a place of prestige (Neveu 2002) and notable power to determine the boundaries of acceptable journalistic behavior (Hovden 2016). Their elevated status is evidenced by journalists’ normative role perceptions across the world: the most prominently featuring roles are related to political functions (Standaert, Hanitzsch, and Dedonder 2019). Political journalists’ boundary work in Western countries has focused primarily on distancing from politicians (Mancini 1993; Brants et al. 2010; Revers 2014). In this process, there have been differences in degree and quality within and between countries and media systems (Pfetsch 2001; Donsbach and Patterson 2004; Van Dalen, Albaek, and de Vreese 2011).

Recent transformations have altered boundaries in political journalism. Social media platforms have created new arenas for political communication where boundaries between politicians and journalists are blurring (Ekman and Widholm 2015). Personalization of politics (Van Aelst, Sheafer, and Stanyer 2012) and journalism’s increasingly commercial orientation (Ekecrantz 2005) have blurred the boundaries between political news and other genres (Schwartz and Berkowitz 2018). Some scholars see this transformation as

Table 1. Framework for studying journalistic boundary work.

	Expansion	Expulsion	Protection of autonomy
Participants	Actors accepted as journalists	Actors rejected as journalists	Actors outside of journalism perceived as threats
Practices	Actions accepted as journalistic	Actions rejected as journalistic	Actions outside of journalism perceived as threats
Propositions	Norms/ideas/beliefs accepted as journalistic	Norms/beliefs/ideas rejected as journalistic	Norms/beliefs/ideas perceived as threats to journalism

Source: Carlson and Lewis 2019, 127.

one element of a more comprehensive softening of journalistic political communication (Otto, Glogger, and Boukes 2017).

In practice, developments differ across countries, which is why it is important to study political journalism's boundary work in different contexts and from multiple perspectives. Arguing that Carlson and Lewis (2019) offer a potential framework for this purpose, this article focuses on Finland where boundary work has historically been influenced by the close connections of politics and the media in the democratic corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004).

The Case of Finland

Similar to other Nordic countries, political journalism in Finland evolved in the twentieth century as part of the democratic corporatist media system, in which journalism gained greater independence from the state and political parties with the help of state interventions (Hallin and Mancini 2004). This meant a change from a mouthpiece of political actors and parties (Strömbäck, Ørsten, and Aalberg 2008) and supporter of welfare state ideology (Syvertsen et al. 2014) to a more autonomous but still elitist and elevated status (Kantola 2013). Boundary work has been active particularly since the 1960s. Participants have changed following the increasing professionalization of journalism and specialization of political journalists (Koljonen 2013) as well as the decline of the party press (Nord 2008). In practices, separation of news and opinion (Salminen 1988) and citizens' marginal presence in political reporting (Kunelius and Väliverronen 2012) have been notable traits. In the realm of propositions, the ideal of objectivity has reigned at the public service broadcaster YLE (Salokangas 1996) and in the press (Salminen 1988).

The "overpoliticization" of Finnish society in the 1970s (Salminen 1988) and "Finlandization" (Forsberg and Pesu 2016) decelerated the differentiation process from politics. Unlike their colleagues in Sweden who increasingly turned to watchdog ideals and practices (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2001), Finnish journalists mainly continued to report political elites' utterances until the 1980s (Salminen 1988; Koljonen 2013). Then, changes in politics and the media market increased media competition and allowed political journalists more freedom and diversity in practice (Salminen 1988). The ideal of being a critical corrective to politicians became increasingly popular among political journalists (Aula 1991) but matters related to the Soviet Union remained delicate issues (Lounasmeri 2013) until the end of the Cold War.

Finland's EU accession in 1995 and national-level legislative changes resulted in a more parliamentary mode of governance (Niemi, Raunio, and Ruostetsaari 2017). Following Sweden (Ekecrantz 2005), Finnish journalism increased its independence from the political sphere and became more reliant on the market. Consequently, the media system turned into a hybrid of democratic corporatist and liberal influences by the early years of this century (Nord 2008). Initially, the changes helped political journalists increase their autonomy vis-à-vis politicians (Herkman 2009) and expand their latitude in stories (Kunelius and Väliverronen 2012). Simultaneously, they kept market pressures, such as increasing audience and participatory considerations (Ahva 2010), at bay. Although political journalists' neutral reporting style persisted, they assumed a more prominent and interpretive role in journalistic output (Kunelius and Väliverronen 2012). Interest in

politicians' personal lives in reporting increased (Juntunen and Väliverronen 2010), as did signs of scandalization and adversarialism (Kantola 2011).

The changes were manifested in political journalists' ethos. Qualitative interviews at the turn of the 2010s indicated three generations of political journalists – solid (born 1939–1955), liquefying (born 1956–1969), and liquid moderns (born 1970–) – who had different opinions about boundaries in political journalism (Kantola 2013). The solid moderns were characterized by a focus on serious reporting, national interest, and established source relations. The liquefying moderns increased distance to politicians in a wave of professionalization, detachment, and storytelling. The liquid moderns had an even more individual approach with increasing opinionatedness and an expanding style and source palette.

Developments in the 2010s have accelerated debate about boundaries in political journalism. Evolutions in the political system, such as the rise of populism (Niemi and Houni 2018), political organizations' increasingly professional communications (Koskimaa 2017), and politicians' growing use of social media (Strandberg 2016) have presented new challenges to political journalists' ideals and practices. Liberal tendencies in the media system have further increased (Ala-Fossi 2020) and commercial imperatives have caught up with political journalists. Media managers have questioned political journalism's elevated position and demanded a more market- and audience-oriented approach (Grönvall 2015). Following lay-offs, newsroom and desk mergers, and other organizational reforms (Väliverronen 2017), political journalism is increasingly done by new participants – non-specialized reporters.

However, a quantitative survey conducted in 2013–14 (Väliverronen 2018) indicated that increasing external and internal pressures have had little impact on political journalists. In their professional ideals, general characteristics of Finnish journalists – independence from politics, impartiality, and a focus on reporting, analysis, and ethics – are accentuated, and audience considerations are less important for them than for other Finnish journalists. Moreover, the generational differences observed by Kantola (2013) are all but gone. Though journalists tend to stick to tried and trusted values in times of change (Wiik 2009) and though methodological differences may explain some of the contradictory findings in the two studies (Väliverronen 2018), the results warrant further probing into political journalists' external and internal boundaries.

Data and Method

This article investigates how Finnish political journalists have negotiated the recent challenges and what kind of external and internal boundaries – if any – emerge among them. The analysis is based on thematic interviews with 27 members of the Association for Political Journalists in Finland (APJF), the only association in the country for reporters and columnists covering national politics. The interviews were done from February to September 2016.

The interviewees were chosen from the association's 130 members. Selection was done purposefully to generate a sample that reflects the diversity of political journalism in terms of outlets (for instance, public service media and party press), reach (national or regional), journalists' positions (freelancers, reporters, or editors), gender, and age. National statistics, APJF membership records, and the earlier survey comparing political journalists

to other Finnish journalists (Väliverronen 2018) were used as benchmarks. New interviewees were sought after refusals and as the interviews progressed until the main categories had been adequately filled and the data had shown signs of saturation (Saunders et al. 2018). The sample is not representative, but its age and gender distribution are rather well aligned with benchmark data. (See Appendix 1 for more information on the sample.)

Interviews were semi-structured and based on previous research (Kantola 2013; Väliverronen 2018) to allow a longitudinal look into evolution in political journalism's participants, practices, and propositions as outlined by Carlson and Lewis (2019). Four key themes were identified: political journalists' role perceptions, their ethical stances, changes in the two during their career, and their estimations of future developments in political journalism. Interviewees could also address other topics that they felt relevant. Here, future visions are excluded from the analysis. Many interviewees described changes over a lengthy period. Based on respondents' remarks and observations by Kantola (2013), the focus in this article is roughly on the 10 years preceding the interviews and references to previous occurrences are for clarity only. The concluding section also discusses developments since the interviews briefly.

Three strategies were used to enhance discussion in the interviews. First, interviewees were granted anonymity in reporting. Second, they were sent the results of Väliverronen's (2018) survey and Kantola's typology of political journalists (2013) beforehand to help them prepare. Many interviewees knew the studies: over 60% of APJF members had filled in the survey, and some had been respondents in Kantola's study. Third, in an adaptation of the stimulated recall technique (Hodgson 2008), the author showed respondents during the interviews selected stories from their career, mostly from the recent past. Depending on the course of the interview, the stories would contradict the respondents' views or invite them to elaborate their stances. The aim of the strategies was to challenge the interviewees to think more deeply about boundaries and potential discrepancies between their words and actions. Thus, the researcher also assumed an active role in the discussion. The impact of these strategies on the results is discussed later.

Interviews lasted 70–152 min (average: 105 min). Transcribed, the recorded material amounted to almost 350,000 words. From the transcriptions, interviewees' remarks about boundary work were collected and analyzed in several iterations using the qualitative content analysis cycle (Kuckartz 2019) for the categories in Carlson and Lewis's framework (2019). In the interviews, external and internal boundary work often appeared hand in hand thematically. However, external boundary work aspects were emphasized in some themes and internal ones in others. The following analysis focuses on key themes of boundary work and reporting is divided into external and internal categories based on how these themes were highlighted by journalists.

Due to the method used, interviews yielded a varying number of remarks to different themes. Thus, quantifying the remarks systematically would be imprecise, and it is not done here. However, any point addressing the general situation among all interviewees has been mentioned by more than five journalists. The comments revealed notable individual variation, but background factors also generated differences between groups of political journalists. The frequency of mentions in such groups is explicated on a case-by-case basis. The most notable boundaries were observed between three age groups: 40 years or less (henceforth, young), 41–51 years (middle-aged), and 52 years or more (senior).

Results

External Boundaries

Political journalists' external boundary work revolved around two themes. The first one operates mainly at the levels of propositions and participants in Carlson and Lewis's framework. It relates to what constitutes politics, what norms govern journalists' relation to politics, and which non-journalistic actors qualify as participants.

Political journalists' professional understanding of politics was strongly moored in national-level representative democracy (see also Reunanen and Koljonen 2018). Almost everyone explicitly endorsed the representative framework and felt their duty was to "maintain this system for democracy," as one interviewee put it. There had been expansion into EU matters following Finland's accession, but cost-cutting at media outlets since the early years of this century had taken its toll. The Union's importance was still acknowledged by many as a proposition, but only a few interviewees followed EU matters in practice. Other forms of democracy, such as direct democracy, were out of bounds altogether. Some young political journalists showed interest in complementing the system-based approach with stories about broader societal issues. Such reasoning was not supported by senior colleagues.

Political journalists cannot deal with all things political. Political journalists deal with matters related to the political system. (Senior reporter)

Another widely shared proposition was personal detachment from system-level politics, particularly political parties (see also Aula 1991; Reunanen and Koljonen 2018). It had also been observed in practice for decades. A few senior reporters said they had been active in party politics but left when they became journalists at the turn of the 1980s. Since then, the connection had faced expulsion: no other interviewees – not even the party press journalists – had any party-political background. Following Kantola (2013), the vast majority were swinging voters, and some even cast blank ballots in elections to highlight their respect for representative democracy and their distance to political parties simultaneously.

Elected institutional political actors, such as party leaders, MPs, and trade union representatives were the main non-journalistic participants in political journalism. Both in thoughts and practice, their presence was unquestioned, even in the case of the right-wing populist Finns Party, which has an anti-establishment and journalism-critical approach (Niemi and Houni 2018). About a third of the interviewees said relations with the Finns Party were uneasy but stated that the rules must remain similar throughout for the sake of democracy and equality. A few reporters referred to Sweden and mentioned the expulsion of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats from political debate (Nygaard 2020) as a practice to be avoided in Finland.

Different participants' presence in political journalism had changed over time, though. A third of the interviewees said their coverage of the government had expanded at the expense of MPs and trade unions. Changes in politics since the 1990s – trade unions' declining membership (Ahtiainen 2019), wide government coalitions across the left-right divide, and a more parliamentary mode of politics further strengthening the position of government (Ruostetsaari 2017; Paloheimo 2017) – were seen as key influences. However, reporters also mentioned other contributing factors. Ritualistic parliamentary

reporting had been reduced in the 1990s due to increasing media competition and the introduction of the Internet. Diminishing resources and increased planning in newsrooms since the mid-2000s, and practical complications arising from major renovations of the Parliament House¹ had further diminished the role of the parliament.

Other actors featured sparingly. Many middle-aged and senior journalists noted that coverage of economic institutions and their actors had expanded slightly in this century following the growing intertwining of politics and economy in Finland (see Poutanen 2018), but their presence was dwarfed by system-political actors. NGOs received even less attention, and individual citizens were mostly viewed as audiences to be served by professionals (see Manin 1997). Again, some young political journalists represented an exception to the system-based approach. They had expanded the participant list and practices of political journalism by including more citizen voices in selected stories, as in the example below (see also Kantola 2013).

I have more of a democratic and inclusive perspective. I think it is nice for readers and viewers to be heard on things that they find important. Hence, we often use their questions in election interviews – not because we do not have our own questions, but because it makes sense and feels relevant. (Young editor)

The second theme of political journalists' external boundary work deals mostly with propositions and practices. It concerns journalists' relations and actions vis-à-vis the participants established in the first theme – that is, mainly institutional political actors. Two phases emerged in the interviews: a period of increasing distance and criticism from the mid-2000s until the turn of the 2010s, and the subsequent phase of increasing debate about the correct distance to and attitude towards political actors.

The first phase belongs to the differentiation process of political journalists and politicians that increased in the 1980s. The process marked an expansion in propositions as journalists increasingly adopted a watchdog mentality. (See also Aula 1991.) Practices also changed. Interaction between politicians and journalists became more distant. More critical reporting and extensive commentary promoted by tabloids increased generally in the new century (see also Kantola 2013). The expansion culminated in the "election funding crisis" in 2008–2011 when politicians' campaign funding practices were investigated with unprecedented fervor. Particularly young journalists stepped forward with adversarial commentary and hard-hitting exposés. (For more, see Kantola 2011.) As noted earlier, at this point Kantola (2013) observed how boundaries had emerged in source relations and reporting styles between three generations of political journalists.

In the second phase after the election funding crisis, differentiation from politicians still reigned in propositions. Interviewees unanimously reiterated the premises noted by Väli-verronen (2018) and Reunanen and Koljonen (2018) as guiding principles in their work: party-politically unattached reporting, a watchdog mentality, an insistence on autonomy and distance to political actors, and a detached analytical focus. Advocacy of any political group was rejected.

However, there were some changes in practices. Some older interviewees estimated that commentary and reporting had been toned down following a backlash against the election funding crisis coverage (see also Kantola 2011). Moreover, instead of Kantola's (2013) three generations, there appeared only two distinct groups: the young and others. Most young journalists maintained greater distance to politicians. Following

findings by Väliverronen (2018) and Kantola (2013), they were more likely than others to accept a more adversarial approach and the use of ethically questionable practices such as hidden microphones. As an expansion, a few females highlighted the importance of physical boundaries as a practice for protecting journalistic autonomy.

Our politics desk went to a political party's breakfast briefing. A politician hugged one of our journalists as we arrived. I thought that looked really odd. I felt it was too much, so the rest of us just shook hands. [...] Because hugs are for friends and family, not for professional matters. (Young female editor)

Older reporters generally positioned themselves closer to the political elites and had different practices for protecting their autonomy. Some criticized the young for a "holier-than-thou" approach and noted that excessive distancing should be avoided as direct interaction between politicians and journalists had been reduced by the increasingly busy nature of politics and journalism, and the expanding role of political assistants as participants in Finnish politics (Niemi-kari, Raunio, and Moring 2019). In this group, highly adversarial journalism and questionable ethical practices were viewed more negatively: for many senior reporters, such practices compromised source relations and the quality of political journalism. Election funding crisis reporting was sometimes mentioned as a dangerous precedent.

Let us say [journalists and politicians] are like colleagues of some sort – we just work in slightly different departments. (Middle-aged reporter)

[Referring to young journalists' distancing practices] I do think if there are briefings with offerings you should not say no to everything because that appears impolite. [...] The key is what message you take home if any, or how you deal with the information you get. (Senior reporter)

At worst, we had journalists as politicians' lapdogs, writing what they were told. Maybe the pendulum swung the other way in the election funding crisis when politicians must have felt journalists were almost antagonistic. We lost democracy then ... (Senior reporter)

Despite many young journalists' approach, political journalists' professional practices with politicians remain largely governed by structural dependencies that delimit excessive distancing and favor attempts to reach mutual understanding (see also Reunanen, Kunelius, and Noppari 2010; Niemi-kari, Raunio, and Moring 2019). With other external participants, practices were remote and restricted. Other institutions such as NGOs were hardly mentioned. Following Väliverronen (2018), political journalists reiterated their distance to citizens and audiences. Despite some young journalists' attempts mentioned earlier, interaction with them was generally and intentionally limited. Many also lamented the oft-negative feedback from audiences.

However, these patterns did not fully apply to the use of social media, which had been a vastly expanding practice. There, engagement with politicians varied notably. Some senior journalists had no social media presence. Most interviewees maintained tight professional boundaries on social media platforms (see also Molyneux and Mourão 2019). They simply followed politicians for quotes and updates and had very little interaction with them. Some middle-aged male journalists engaged heavily with politicians on Twitter, the preferred platform in Finland for politicians and political journalists (Vainikka and Huhtamäki 2015). Their style on Twitter was intentionally more opinionated,

confrontational, and light-hearted than elsewhere. It had proved popular – these journalists were among the most followed persons on Twitter in Finland. They motivated their practice by saying Twitter is a separate platform from the journalistic arena, and it enables and requires different affordances (see also Ottovordemgentschenfelde 2017).

I know many people find my tweets odd. But I have thought [Twitter] is a small circle of a few politicians and journalists and it does not have any bearing on the things we otherwise tell large audiences. I have allowed myself that because you need to have some fun in life. (Middle-aged male reporter)

A few senior reporters presented a different view on the separation of social media and journalism. In their opinion, social media platforms with their affordances, and the way some politicians and other non-journalists used social media, had affected practices in political journalism by changing the boundaries of acceptability. Two alarming developments were identified: increasing difficulties in protecting journalistic autonomy from non-journalistic actors, and growing pressures to apply social media practices and styles in political journalism.

Recently, I have been increasingly worried by discussions, ideas, initiatives, and feedback on social media seeping into mainstream media. The boundaries are clearly blurring, and the temptation to flirt with social media seems to be increasing. Of course, you can pick up topics from social media – no harm there – but it also leads to panic stations, so to speak, where things that are trivial and unimportant in my view begin to guide decision-making in mainstream media. (Senior reporter)

Internal Boundaries

In contrast to political journalists' relatively stable external boundaries, there had been more turbulence in their internal boundaries since the mid-2000s. It stemmed largely from the growing influence of commercial imperatives in newsrooms. Interviewees unanimously said that "the wall" (Coddington 2015) between political journalists and non-journalists – that is, media outlets' advertising and marketing departments – had remained intact. However, newsrooms' internal adaptation to a changing mediascape and tightening finances plus the growth of online reporting (Hujanen 2007; Nikunen 2014) had altered the previously untouchable position of political journalism and political journalists.

Most outlets had made cutbacks in their politics desk while some had combined politics with domestic news or economy desks (see also Väliverronen 2018). Several interviewees had increasingly had to defend political journalism in internal talks about resources as editors had become less inclined to prioritize political journalism and protect political journalists' autonomy (see also Grönvall 2015). Teamwork, planning, and doing more with less had become more common (see also Kantola 2013). While these changes had had some positive consequences, overall, they had meant growing demands and greater stress. In this regard, political journalists had followed other Finnish journalists (Pöyhtäri, Väliverronen, and Ahva 2016).

We now think more about what is important and what is not, and what to prioritize and what not. On the other hand, we are also more hurried, which has led to us doing a lot of useless stuff, or things we could leave out. And the workload has grown enormously. (Middle-aged reporter)

My capacity goes largely into keeping things under control – checking out that the stories look OK, and we publish stories about more or less the right topics at more or less the right time. I should discuss content issues a lot more with reporters, but I feel limited every single day. (Young editor)

The changes had generated internal boundaries at all levels of Carlson and Lewis's framework. Two interrelated main themes with relatively similar patterns of development emerged in the interviews: journalistic style, and professional values. In both categories, political journalists distinguished themselves from other journalists. In comparisons amongst political journalists, young reporters again appeared as a separate group from their older colleagues.

In stylistic considerations, political journalists' internal boundary work was firstly related to the expansion in participants. News and economy reporters and online desk journalists had increasingly been assigned political journalism duties in combined newsrooms. Their practices prompted ample criticism from political journalists. Protecting their autonomy, many interviewees criticized non-specialists of a lighter approach to politics as opposed to their more serious focus. Remarks about "fixing up" non-specialists' standard reporting were commonplace among the older two age groups. Criticisms were tinged with worry about potential damage to the credibility of political journalism.

This might be an unfair generalization, but I think that as a rule, economy beat reporters believe their sources. [...] Meanwhile, political journalists automatically assume that politicians are talking bullshit. (Middle-aged reporter)

It drives me up a wall when I see who [online desk journalists] have interviewed as experts. And they do not consult you though they should. They tend to come up with wisdom that is anything but. (Middle-aged editor)

In times of greater autonomy in politics desks, other journalists' attempts to expand practices in political journalism – such as stories in women's magazines about politicians' private lives (Ruoho and Saarenmaa 2011) – were regularly dismissed as insignificant and marginal efforts. Following the changes in newsrooms, political journalists were increasingly affected by non-specialists' practices despite their critical attitude. Especially tabloid press reporters' repertoire had been expanded by stories about "lighter matters." Some did such stories willingly; others used such topics grudgingly as a springboard to "real politics".

[The reporter's former boss] put it well when he said you always had to invent some gimmicks to market the actual political story to editors. We used to throw darts with politicians and talk some politics too. Then we would write a combined story about the whole thing to the weekend pages. (Senior freelancer)

Amongst political journalists, young reporters stood out from the older groups. Overall, they had slightly different propositions from others regarding journalistic style. They were keener than others to expand their style to suit audiences' preferences, mainly with the help of web analytics. Young journalists were also more willing to present their opinions in political journalism than their older colleagues (see also Kantola 2013). However, they had limited opportunities to put these propositions into practice. Young reporters, especially those working in regional outlets, had increasingly been obliged to multitask across genres (see also Nikunen 2014), while such practice was usually voluntary

for older journalists. Stating an opinion in political news was unanimously deemed unacceptable, and after debates on the coverage of the election funding crisis, political commentary duties had been assigned mostly to senior and middle-aged journalists. Young reporters were also otherwise deemed by many older colleagues to be less able to protect their autonomy against editors.

Discussions about journalistic style were reflected in professional ideals. In addition to avoiding light-heartedness, most political journalists distinguished themselves from other journalists by reiterating Väliiverronen's (2018) findings: higher adherence to impartiality, autonomy, distance, and analysis. Although these differences between Finnish journalists were not very big in Väliiverronen (2018), they were used by several interviewees to highlight the special nature of political journalists.

If you compare us with foreign news beat reporters, many of them might have a slightly heroic perception of themselves as people trying to improve remote things – to reduce famine, child mortality, and so on. But we are in Finland; we do not have such things, and if we become advocates for someone or something it is a bit problematic. (Middle-aged reporter)

The propositions highlighted by political journalists echo recent interpretations of objectivity in the Finnish context (Koljonen 2013; Reunanen and Koljonen 2018). Objectivity was also an acceptable, if ultimately unattainable, practical target for most political journalists. However, particularly among young reporters and party press journalists there appeared resistance to some of its aspects. Instead of “hiding” behind the veil of objectivity, these journalists favored a more transparent approach about their personal choices, values, and commitments. However, implementing such transparency was deemed difficult, and its impact in practice was limited.

We constantly choose what to write about and how, who to interview, and so on. [...] I am a feminist and social liberalist and support green values, and I find it better to say it out loud. (Young party press journalist)

I am not sure if [journalists' greater personal transparency] would help. [...] Probably people would just read your stories like the Devil can cite Scripture for his purpose. They already do that. (Young editor, commercial media)

A third category of boundary work also emerged: general attitude to work. Here, political journalists made no attempt to distinguish themselves from non-specialists, but comparisons between political journalists' practices followed earlier groupings. Young political journalists generally kept more distance to work and its demands than the older groups. Such an approach was occasionally born out of external influences such as child-rearing, but mostly it was a conscious individual decision to maintain work-life balance. For middle-aged and senior reporters, a work-first attitude was commonplace.

Journalists are busier these days, so free time has become more of a commodity. Maybe you do not want to meet a minister on your free Tuesday night, but you just want to go home. (Young editor)

Being a good journalist means [journalism] has to be your lifestyle. Unfortunately, many other things suffer because of that. (Middle-aged reporter)

Discussion and Conclusions

Finnish political journalists' boundary work is multifaceted, but two key strands in it can be distinguished. First, from Carlson and Lewis's framework (2019), central issues were related to protection of autonomy, and with it, questions of traditions and privileges. Historically, much like their colleagues in the other Nordic countries (Strömbäck, Ørsten, and Aalberg 2008), Finnish political journalists have strived to increase their autonomy from political actors and to maintain an elevated and isolated position in newsrooms (Kantola 2013). These traits were still highly evident in the interviews. In propositions (see also Väliverronen 2018) and practices, political journalists' external boundary work largely concentrates on maintaining a healthy distance from institutional political actors, who are by far the most important non-journalistic participants. In their internal boundary work, political journalists distinguish themselves from other participating journalists in propositions (see also Väliverronen 2018) and practices. By viewing themselves as a different – and better – breed, they reinforce the idea of political journalism as the “most sacred” part (Neveu 2002) of journalism.

However, protecting their autonomy and elevated position has become more difficult for political journalists, which leads to the second key strand of their boundary work. Following recent changes – particularly mounting commercial pressures in political journalism, but also the expansion of social media and participants in both politics and political journalism – they more frequently find themselves in situations where their control of the boundaries has loosened and “something gotta give” in their boundary work. This was particularly evident in the differences that surfaced between the shared and ongoing support for the propositions noted in Väliverronen (2018) and their varying practical interpretations. These interpretations corroborate Kantola's (2013) findings: overall, political journalists' flexibility with boundaries has further increased.

However, the novel finding of this study is that the three generational groups observed in Kantola (2013) have turned into two. Young journalists are generally keenest to redefine boundaries (see also Lee-Wright, Phillips, and Witschge 2012, 153), but they are affected most by recent changes (see also Honkonen 2019), which often require compromises. Middle-aged reporters – Kantola's “revolutionaries” (2013, 621–622) – have established themselves and senior journalists have adapted to changes to the degree that they have amalgamated into one group. They are in a more secure position, and their mentality is characterized by a relatively cautious and defensive approach to change. However, on social media, some middle-aged journalists' light-hearted and confrontational approach indicates an expansion of the more distant practices preferred by others.

Generational polarization resulted in some internal friction in the interviews, but following Kantola (2013), differences between political journalists were not insurmountable. Many interviewees did voice their concern about future developments amidst pressures, but no sudden changes in boundaries appear to have taken place. External pressures from the political system were notable in 2016 (e.g., Eronen, Liski, and Vuorikoski 2017) but have somewhat abated in the last few years. Internally, political journalists' changing position within newsrooms, and developments in social media practices and political journalism online remain of interest, as they did in the interviews. However, they have received little scholarly attention. Recent journalistic work on productive political journalists' social

media and online commentary practices suggests that polarization on social media affects political journalists' boundary work (Haapalainen, Marttinen, and Pettersson 2021) and that debate among practitioners still follows the boundaries presented here.

This leads us to assess the findings shortly in light of the choices made in this study. First, given the incremental rather than abrupt nature of changes in political journalists' boundaries in Finland and the extrapolations made above, using data from 2016 does not seem to pose a significant weakness to the reliability of the results in the current environment. Secondly, Carlson and Lewis's framework is a useful starting point for investigating and classifying the multiple aspects of boundary work and their longitudinal changes. However, if there is a lesson to be learnt from this study, it is that the framework alone is no magic bullet; what matters is how it is applied. Understanding journalists' boundary work and its evolution requires a firm grasp of the local context and methodological awareness. Both triangulation (see also Carlson and Lewis 2019) and temporal comparisons, between different studies or otherwise, are needed.

The chosen strategy of this study – incorporating Kantola (2013), Väliverronen (2018) and journalistic articles into semi-structured interviews – was helpful in many ways. It facilitated discussions and assisted interviewees in producing in-depth information about their ethos and ways of working. Moreover, the approach helped political journalists do self-reflection, compare themselves with non-specialists and each other and assess the boundaries from multiple angles and over time. Problems were related to practical execution. Some interviewees had not had time to familiarize themselves with the earlier studies before the interviews. In such cases, the author had to assume a more active role and explain the logic of the studies, which impacted interaction dynamics and gave journalists less voice. Journalists also had to resort to quick interpretations of previous studies' results. Both can be regarded as drawbacks. However, the researcher's interventions – one potential problem – did not lead to criticism as such, which indicates that the approach might be applicable in other contexts as well.

It must be noted that this study has its limitations. Despite triangulation, its focus is strongly on political journalists and their discursive efforts. Obtaining a more nuanced and holistic picture of their boundary work necessitates examining other actors' views for a more thorough understanding of the metajournalistic discourse (Carlson 2016). It also requires further investigation into political journalists' everyday working conditions, their interactions with journalistic and non-journalistic actors, and the output that they produce. In this sense, particularly ethnographic studies such as the one by Revers (2014) should prove useful in understanding how political journalists negotiate their boundaries. Finally, to help future empirical studies, theoretical development is needed for explicating the underlying mechanisms that govern boundary work and relations between participants, practices and propositions in different contexts.

Note

1. Renovation work started in 2009 and was most intense at the time of the interviews when Parliament sessions were held in temporary premises.

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Appendix 1. Information on interviewees.

Gender		
Females	41 % (cf. 45 % of APJF members in 2015)	
Age		
Age range	29–69 years	
Average age	48 years (cf. 51 years in J. Väliverronen 2018)	
Standard deviation	10.0 years	
40 years or less		8
41–51 years		8
52 years or more		11
Outlets		
Public service media	-	4
News agencies		2
Commercial media		18
Party press		3
Reach		
National	-	24
Regional		3
Position		
Freelancer	-	3
Reporter		17
Editor		7