Round-table discussion on diversity in the media

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Background

Finnish society is rapidly becoming increasingly diverse. Diversification, increased multilingualism, and multiculturalism in general mean that new ways of life are appearing alongside the mainstream. The ageing of the population challenges the service structures of society, and the ways that young people communicate and receive messages differs sharply from that of the older generations. Various digital platforms and the fragmentation of the use of the media also separate and link people together in a new way. These paths of development challenge the journalistic media in many ways. How can we depict and describe societal reality in a manner that shows its true diversity? And what does media diversity mean in practice? Can diversity be verified, or is it always a matter of personal feeling and experience that are distorted by algorithms and a personal social bubble? How much diversity would be enough? What are all the things would need to happen to bring about a significant increase in media diversity from the present level?

A diverse group of experts convened at the invitation of the DECA Project at the University of Helsinki in November 2023 to discuss the state of diversity in Finland and to consider concrete measures to increase it. Speaking at the event were DECA Project researcher Matleena Ylikoski and Kati Puustinen, Development Manager at the public service broadcaster Yle. They opened some of the theoretical background of journalistic diversity and practices of diverse journalism, as well as their experiences on the development work for The News Source diversity meter. After this the discussion continued in small groups which were given three different assignments concerning the present state, challenges, and future prospects of diversity. Thoughts and suggestions that arose between the group discussions and at the end of the event were shared.

To provide background information and encourage discussions, participants received a text along with their invitations, written by Matleena Ylikoski, titled in Finnish “Yhteiskunnan monimuotoistuminen haastaa median. Kohti moniäänis-empää julkisuutta.”

Representatives from the following organisations signed up for the event: The University of Tampere, Yle – the Finnish Broadcasting Company, the Finnish Youth Research Society, the University of Helsinki, the Finnish Innovation Fund
Sitra, the University of Eastern Finland, the Finnish Association for the Welfare of Older Adults, the Finnish League for Human Rights, the Finnish Russian-speakers’ association, the Sámi Parliament of Finland, Haaga-Helia University of Applied Sciences, Räty-Salovaara-Blåfield, the National Audiovisual Institute, the Finnish Local Heritage Federation, the Finnish Foundation for Media and Development, Support for Asylum Seekers Tutu ry, News Media Finland, The JOKES Foundation, and the Ecumenical Council of Finland.

**Principles for drafting the report**

This report has been compiled from notes that were taken at the round-table event. In the discussions and the drafting of the report, the so-called Chatham House rule was employed, under which participants are allowed to freely use information that they have received, but they must not reveal the identity of participants when using the information.

**Situational awareness and future goals of diversity**

*Media diversity is a topical issue in which changes constantly occur. Consequently, nobody has comprehensive situational awareness of the matter, not even through research. The round table discussion began with participants pondering the current state of diversity in Finland.*

There has been progress the strengthening of diversity, but more work is needed. There was agreement in the discussion that no single solution exists that can solve problems related to diversity, and that comprehensive goals and procedures were needed.

The media field is still very middle class and male. There are many people and many communities that continue to find it difficult to find something they can identify with, and to make their voices heard in the mainstream media. For example, ethnic minorities, the elderly, and the socio-economically disadvantaged are easily bypassed both in the media and in the ways that diversity is measured today. These groups need more visibility in the media and in meters used for measurement, and common factors need to be found among the different groups for reining in the trend toward polarisation in society.
Big media houses want to boost diversity. In the discussion emphasis was placed on the need to better include diversity in the content of the mainstream media and to make it standard procedure in all editorial offices. Outsourcing diversity to special editorial teams and programmes specialised in diversity is not an adequate measure for increasing diversity.

Diversity might be seen to have been implemented when persons of different appearances and backgrounds are seen in the media. However, diversity is also powerfully linked with issues of belief and philosophy. In the news media the current phenomenon is often approached through the world view and values of the majority population. For example, the Finnish media places a strong emphasis on the individual. Consolidation of diversity also requires paying more attention to different worldviews, too. One issue that arose in the discussion was that increasing and developing foreign news can be seen as promotion of diversity. There are many Finns of foreign background, and international news can bring them something to identify with.

Diversity is an important goal in journalistic work, but it is nevertheless always secondary to the topic of the story. Diversity gets greater emphasis in certain news topics, and it is pondered actively while with others, a lack of diversity is not recognised as a problem. For example, diversity is not as strongly manifested in issues linked with technology as it is in other areas. For example, seniors and immigrants are interviewed less frequently in stories related to technology.

Minorities should also be seen and heard in the media as more than representatives of a specific group. For example, persons with disabilities affecting their mobility should be interviewed in topics other than those related to accessibility. Diversity is not genuine if minorities are considered only when specific issues are discussed, while other societal debate focuses on the general population.

Efforts by Yle to promote diversity have been noticed and Yle's role in it was seen as very important. There was much hope that Yle would develop the state of diversity further, but it was also observed that the onus of implementing diversity cannot be placed exclusively on a public service institution. Concern was raised during the discussion that click-bait headlines of commercial media set the pace, undermining confidence in journalism. Nevertheless, commercial media outlets have also recognised the value of diversity that plays an important role in preserving and reinforcing trust.
In the discussion it was observed that the work of an editorial office is often defined by routines and practical preconditions. In the search for an expert to interview, the same people are often invited again and again if they are often easily available, or if they are known to be good interviewees, for example. On the other hand, some researchers and specialists might consciously avoid public discussion and speaking out of minorities because it can lead to hate speech and disparagement, especially when it comes to polarized and controversial topics.

The way that media diversity is experienced by the public can also vary considerably in different parts of Finland. For example, if cultural, ethnic, or linguistic diversity is not reflected in a person’s own everyday life, the discussion on ethnic diversity might seem remote or even that a “diversity agenda” was being imposed on them: diversity might be opposed if it is seen as political. Personal media consumption affects how media diversity is experienced. Although the content might be “perfect”, we experience the media in different ways and pay attention to different things. In addition, artificial intelligence and algorithms increasingly influence the kind of content that we see.

From the diversity point of view, it is important to follow the demographic development of media consumers, such as the growth of ethnic minorities or the elderly population in Finland. Many failures are associated with this, but there have also been successes. For example, the voices of Ukrainian refugees who have recently arrived in Finland have come out in the Finnish media very well. This can serve as a lesson for the future.

**Challenges of measuring and analysing diversity**

In the second part of the round-table discussion, the focus was on addressing the challenges of measuring diversity. Different types of meters, which automatically monitor diversity in news sources, have been developed in recent years, but they have mostly been limited to identifying the gender of the sources. However, diversity is more than just a gender issue, and it should be possible to collect data on other dimensions of diversity if greater variation in the measurements is sought. Certain diversity information, such as the title of an interviewee or the party of a politician, can be picked directly from the news text, but other dimensions such as being part of a minority, or the world view of the
person, cannot always be externally identified. How can diversity data about people and things be compiled in an ethical manner?

The many challenges in the interpretation of the results of diversity measurements were initially noted. What is measured, and on what basis can it be said that the level that is being sought has been achieved? How can we even decide on an adequate level of diversity? The interpretation of the results requires clear criteria and diverse qualitative approaches. In the discussion it was pointed out that the latest applications of artificial intelligence could help in the analysis of masses of content, but before including them, a consensus would be needed on what is being measured and why.

While methods of measurement must be developed and critical discussions about them must be held, we also need to accept that measurements never bring perfect results, nor do they offer ready answers. They can nevertheless be useful and work as a starting point for discussions and the development of activities.

Journalistic choices are not simple. For example, if there is a need to interview an engineer, do we want to bring out a “typical” person or should we consciously select a person who differs from an engineer stereotype in some way? These selections are made and considered in different editorial offices and in connection with different news stories from different starting points.

It would be beneficial to get more information on the backgrounds of the interviewees, but this can be difficult for many reasons. The suggestion that the interviewees could be asked directly about their backgrounds can also backfire and raise suspicions. Routinely asking about personal background might seem alien to Finland, where many issues relevant to diversity, such as age, education, income level and functional ability are seen as strictly private matters. On the other hand, it was pointed out in the discussion that people might grow accustomed to this approach if it were used more extensively. It would also be useful to get more information on the backgrounds of the journalists. This could be beneficial in increasing diversity among journalists, for example.

Finland needs more accurate statistics on the languages spoken by citizens at home. At present only one language may be given as a person’s mother tongue. This blurs the image of linguistic diversity. It would also be a good idea for the
media to stop using the vague concept of “foreign languages” when pointing to other languages than Finnish and Swedish.

Measuring diversity carries the risk that promoting diversity in media companies could get bogged down in numbers and statistics without developing into a qualitative understanding about the phenomenon itself. We need to find ways of bringing the promotion of diversity into the core of journalistic production (increasing understanding) and into the development of business (numbers and statistics). Representatives of minorities should be engaged in product development, designing measurement methods, and setting goals already at the start of the process.

Proposals for improving the state of diversity

At the end of the discussion practical measures and tasks were visualised which could help significantly improve the state of media diversity. Finland is a late starter in developing the promotion of diversity. This is why it is worthwhile to have a goal-oriented assessment of good and proven practices also from other countries, and to follow their example.

Editorial offices can actively encourage journalists to recognise their own privileges and presumptions as a way of promoting diversity in the story-writing process. Privileges always involve a conflict between the privileged groups and others, and this also applies to journalism. When power is redistributed in editorial offices, someone must always give up a privileged position. For example, producing multi-lingual news can lead to a reduction in news in the dominant language. Letting go can be painful, and it cannot be assumed that it will happen easily or painlessly, but everyone ultimately benefits from diversity.

As a form of power redistribution, Journalists could give more space to persons concerned/people targeted by the news, in setting a point of view of the story and in the selection of interviewees. This could be seen as an allocation of journalistic power in which the editorial office would continue to have the final say and bear the ultimate responsibility, but the actual production of the stories might look different than it is now. Journalists could also engage in more networking in the acquisition of information so that they would not directly ask for an interview. Instead, they could seek background information on phenomena and suitable interviewees through the networks.
It was proposed at the round table that geographical diversity could be promoted through “light correspondence”. Instead of embarking on a day-long trip to another community to produce a story, a journalist could spend more time there to get a better understanding of the local point of view and to network with the local population.

Language requirements can be eased in editorial offices and in journalistic training. Finnish language skills do not need to be perfect in every case. Today’s journalism is also largely visual. Access to journalistic training and jobs by members of minorities should be supported more than it is now.

Researchers and other experts were urged to consider their own positions when the media asks for an interview. Experts can ask themselves if they feel that they are the right person to give an interview or to comment on an issue, or if the request might be passed on to another person who represents an alternate voice or point of view.

Awareness of diversity should be increased everywhere. No individual medium, specialist organisation, or person can solve everything, but everyone can take part in the promotion of diversity.

Finland needs regular and coordinated work on behalf of diversity, which could be implemented, for example, as a joint project of media companies. Focused work would save resources and would bring even the smallest of media into the realm of development. For example, establishing shared diversity goals (a so-called common minimum) which all media outlets would commit to, would be a great step forward.

Academic research on media audiences should be conducted regularly and for the long term to enable the monitoring of progress and to get comprehensive and inclusive information on the implementation of diversity, and the lack of it, from the point of view of the public. The dimensions of diversity linked with world views and values also need to be included in audience research at large. This type of research requires regular funding that does not depend on the implementation of individual projects.

While media outlets do keep tabs on their consumers, their research often focuses on young people, consumption habits, and social media. Research on the
public should be developed so that it would examine the public in new ways and look at different groups of people and their diversity more broadly and consistently. News avoidance is also a phenomenon that requires more attention. Who are the people that the media does not reach?