

Radio News

The Finnish News Agency and the Finnish Broadcasting Company¹

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The question of the amount and criteria of news broadcast in the network of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (henceforth YLE) was a long enduring one. STT news was included in the very first YLE broadcast, and the broadcasting company abstained from starting its own news service.

In October 1943 a memo was produced within the YLE on the possibility of its own news programmes. Attention was drawn to matters that were to be discussed all over again as time passed. The Finnish News Agency (henceforth STT for Suomen Tietotoimisto; the corresponding Swedish name is Finska Nyhetsbyrån, FNB) was criticised for the scarce amount of news as well as their choice and appearance. And yet news had been found to be the most important programme in the (war-time) radio.²

The YLE's own news broadcasts were not started but after more than two decades. The Director General of the Company, however, was elected a member of the board of the STT in 1947, after the YLE had managed to become a shareholder against the will of the STT's management and old owners.³ The STT was owned by the press.

In 1956 the General Manager of the STT described its radio news in a way which demonstrated that nothing conclusive had happened since the war:⁴

For already about 30 years the YLE and the STT have had an agreement, and within that the listeners are given news reviews of 7-10 minutes. The aim of the STT is that the listeners should get information on the most important domestic and world events in a brief and matter-of-fact format. Detailed reporting and colouring is left to the reporters of the YLE and newspapers. The STT tries its best to be impartial – it lets the events speak for themselves. Therefore news sources are often cited.

The STT serves newspapers of all parties. In tense times, when the battle between various interest groups is intense, attempts are made to try to feed the STT with half truths and tendentious resolutions. Often only a few minutes are left to edit this material and to translate it to the other national language, and the danger of errors is great.

As we are a bilingual country, the STT reads its news in both national languages. This sometimes creates difficulties. News reading has often been criticised, but at least so far the STT can't afford to offer the listeners pleasant and beautiful reading – one must suffice oneself with reviews read in a matter-of-fact and clear way.

Matter-of-fact reviews, raw news, true things in a clear voice – and still there was discontent.

The statement of the General Manager offers a possibility to interpret that the STT's aspiration not to take position meant that they wanted to leave the news source the power to choose the viewpoint and define the reality. The aim to tell truths and not opinions leads to a situation where "truth" and deviation from it are defined from "normal". Power tells truths, the powerless declare subjective opinions.

Without assuming that the Communists somehow had been "objectively" more "right" than they seemed to be in the hegemonic atmosphere of the 1950's, the former makes more understandable their constant dissatisfaction with the STT radio news. Their subjective reality was so different from that of the STT and the rest of the hegemonic reality.

During the general strike of winter 1956 the YLE seems to have made a deal with the strike leadership to practice impartiality by abstaining from dealing with the strike.

In the actualities programme "Daily Mirror" the Prime Minister "gave a speech on the situation" on March 3, but otherwise the strike could scarcely be noticed from the YLE. From March 7th on next day's radio programme schedule was read after "the Mirror". (The newspapers did not come out.) On Sunday, March 18th the Interior Minister read the Government's appeal on keeping order, on Monday there was a guidance and information review on traffic and postal services, and on Tuesday, March 20th "the Mirror" dealt with finishing the strike, as well as the next day.⁵

The STT radio news told more about the strike, and the trade unions found so many faults in the coverage that a demonstration was held outside the STT office. In a later

estimation within the STT the events left a long enduring strain between the agency and the trade union movement.⁶

A Communist member of the YLE Administrative Council and five other Communist MPs made a Parliamentary Inquiry during the strike, asking what the Government intended to do "to steer the STT news service broadcast by the YLE so that it would not act against the working people" who had gone to strike. They emphasized that the news from the STT and the YLE should not "serve the interests of any party or class against the interests of other parties or classes". However, "the STT news broadcast by the YLE have been biased in a way that is clearly unfriendly" towards the strikers.⁷

In its comment the YLE Board of Directors started with an interesting point:⁸

From the start the YLE has followed the same principle as many foreign radio companies, that the radio must not itself administer or take responsibility of the news material that is broadcast. Therefore the YLE news service has been left in care of the semi-official national news agency, STT.

Furthermore the Board pointed out that in the agreement between the companies the STT in its news reviews committed to follow the "objectivity and impartiality" that was included the YLE's concession and also, within this framework, take into consideration the YLE's wishes on the content and quality of the news. Impartiality was emphasized, but otherwise the YLE had not wanted to influence the STT. In the case of the general strike the YLE had especially emphasized that the STT should try to be objective and impartial.

In 1956 the Board of the YLE regarded it necessary to remind that many broadcasting companies did not have news programmes of their own. In 1943 the YLE had wanted to emphasize that many had.

Now the YLE wanted to take the position that it should not want to establish a news service of its own – better that a ”semi-official” news agency took care of it. At least Programme Director Jussi Koskiluoma had changed his mind under the pressure of post-war self censorship and need to let the company become an outsider in society. The YLE’s reply to the Communists’ inquiry fit well in the cautiously conservative policy that the company followed in its relation to society, the reality of which the YLE only partly regarded as its business.

Also a Parliament Inquiry in 1960 by the Opposition fraction of the Social Democrats stirred up principle positions from the YLE and the STT. The issue was the news coverage of the splitting of trade union movement. The inquirers felt that the STT gained ”the disruptors”, e.g. the mainstream Social Democrats who ruled the party but not the trade unions.

The YLE Board justified using the STT by its broad ownership base: a number of newspapers and the YLE – and by the fact that there was no other news agency in the country, ”which represented as many dailies with different backgrounds and opinions and had as extensive global news coverage”.⁹

The STT emphasized¹⁰ that it was ”an impartial enterprise owned by newspapers from different parties, and aims at greatest possible objectivity and avoids being influenced from the outside”. This is how the STT described its relation to the YLE:

The fact that the STT, from the start of broadcasting, has been allowed on its own name to offer the public daily news reviews, is due to economic and expediency reasons. And probably because the broadcasting company which is under strict state control, has wanted to give its listeners also an impartial and uncensored news service. This news service, however, has no monopoly rights.

In the YLE’s copy the last sentence is commented in Programme Director Jussi Koskiluoma’s handwriting: ”except in practice”. Seen from the YLE it was a matter of STT monopoly as long as the YLE did not send news of its own.

The most interesting points were the STT’s remark on the YLE being under control plus its own impartiality and freedom from censorship – and the YLE’s remark on the STT’s broad and politically pluralistic ownership base.

In the YLE they were conscious that state control was a kind of political control that took place through the Administrative Council and the Programme Councils. In these circumstances, as news items themselves often dealt with controversial issues, the politically most secure base for the YLE was a news agency owned by party organs and other newspapers with at least a past political affiliation. In this way the responsibility of the ”objectivity” of news broadcasts could be transferred to the very circles that ”controlled” the YLE through its administration structure.

Throughout the 1950s the YLE radio broadcast five STT news reviews a day both in Finnish and in Swedish. In 1959 a sixth was introduced, and in 1962 a seventh. Extra broadcasts were possible in the 1960s, but a good reason was needed, such as Finnair plane crashes, the Government’s resignation or the assassination of President Kennedy. A net of seven broadcasts was not dense, and a problem was the fact that between the regular times, the YLE was not allowed to tell news but had to alarm the STT for an extra bulletin. The STT’s practical news monopoly could not be satisfactory for the YLE radio, a medium whose trump card, at least in principle, was rapidity.

Current Affairs Programmes

– Almost News

The YLE's principal post-war current affairs programmes were "Today", a Finnish language review broadcast on weekdays before the STT evening news, and its Swedish language equivalent three days a week after the Swedish language STT evening news. In November 1951 the Finnish "Today" was moved to its "natural" slot, after the news, and its duration was extended from nine minutes to fifteen, which enabled it to take 3-5 items instead of 1-2. Now also foreign reports were dealt with by "Today". The annual number of items in "Today" was established to 1100-1200, but as there were also other Finnish language current affairs programmes, by mid-1960s the annual total of items was 3500-4000.

Of the other programmes one might mention the weekly "In the Focus", which was established in 1957 to concentrate material from several previous programmes. The aim was to enlarge and sharpen the coverage of events. In the first broadcast the editor stated that one weekly programme was better than several reviews of special fields, whose programme slot had to be filled even if there was nothing worth mentioning. He wished that the programme "gives the YLE an opportunity to satisfy those critics who – certainly with a good reason – have condemned the radio's talk programmes as formalistic". He wiped out from his manuscript a stronger formulation, how the aim was to "loosen the programmes from the often enough criticized empty 'radio impartiality'".¹¹

Newspaper editors were often used as commentators. In the first programme the speaker was the Chief Editor of the main Agrarian organ and a trusted man of Presi-

dent Kekkonen. He uttered serious words against foreign political ardour and in favour of realism.¹²

In 1959 "Topical Studio" was founded to be sent on weekdays after late news. It was a ten minute review of news events, domestic and world politics, economic issues and sports. Now the YLE had a current affairs programme of its own to complement the STT's both Finnish language evening news reviews.

In 1962 a pirate radio station went on air from the Baltic off the Swedish territorial waters. Stockholm was its target, but its signal could be caught even in Southern and Western Finland. Eventually the Swedish Radio started its third programme, and the YLE filled its air time gaps with light music and talk, "Melody Radio", in May 1963.

The radio news question was discussed. Chief of Programming, Doctor Helge Miettunen knew that radio could be made a flexible news medium: "I have the impression that today news and newslike programmes are the lifeblood of sound radio. And yet the news are the only programmes that are made amateurishly." He had read an American book where "as model examples of bad news editing they present the very things that I have brawled about. The STT reads dry memos, and reads them badly, without a contact to the issue. The news are wrongly formulated: they start as far as possible and do not pick up the important." The Melody Radio, however, had managed to report almost on-line for instance about the American space flight. "It is a wonderful trump card to be able to tell what happens now, right at this moment", Miettunen exclaimed.¹³

Before leaving for his summer holiday Miettunen gave instructions to use small news items in between the records in the

Melody Radio. This, however, came to an end as the STT forbade the use of its material in a way that came close to the YLE's own news broadcasts. Programme Director Koskiluoma told that the STT General Manager "called infuriated and threatened to send us large extra bills unless we stop giving news in our own programmes". Instructions were given that the STT prints could be used only as tips, but additional material and comments were for YLE reporters to get.¹⁴

Anyway, the Melody Radio was a step towards the YLE's own news service. At that phase the YLE Current Affairs Section had started to be seen as a Current Affairs and News Section" that not only complemented the STT but also partly replaced it.

The YLE's Annual Report 1964 said: "The share of current affairs programmes on the radio was increased. The general purpose was to send a reporter of our own to the focus of domestic as well as foreign events." The number of current affairs programmes increased as well as their air time, and the range of topics got broader. The YLE could not help getting closer to the basic question: all this, but why not radio news of its own?

The YLE Radio News

The new Director General Eino S. Repo (1965-69) had many reform plans, one of which was the YLE's own radio news. In February 1965 the YLE Board created the post of a News Chief and in April filled it with the young (28) but experienced journalist Ralf Friberg. Repo wanted a bilingual person, and Friberg's other qualities were known to him. Friberg came to the YLE from the Foreign Office, and the posting was discussed with and approved

by President Kekkonen. (The discussion took place, not untypically, in the President's sauna.) Friberg was a trusted supporter of Kekkonen's foreign policy.¹⁵

Repo's plans did not go unnoticed by the STT. In the last working day of 1964 the STT General Manager wrote a worried letter¹⁶ to Programme Director Koskiluoma: already prior to his inauguration Repo had "hurried to call out his opinions on developing news services, even touching upon the Radio's relationship with the STT". But

You (Koskiluoma), who have for years wrestled with these problems, know better that they are not simple but connected with such quite significant matters as preserving a free national news agency, the relationship between the press and radio and freedom of speech in general in this politically so versatile country of ours.

The STT General Manager emphasized that his agency had no claim to "set the radio news forever in its old mold" and that the real issue was money and resources.

An agreement¹⁷ was negotiated, and in May 1965 it was signed. In accordance to it the YLE paid the STT for its material an annual compensation which was bound to the number of radio and television licences. Additionally, the YLE paid an extra fee for Reuters' English language service that was mediated by the STT. – Ralf Friberg estimated in 1994 that the STT lost more than it realized, because after getting the rights to use the prints of Reuters and later other foreign agencies the YLE News Section became independent of the STT and got the foreign material no later than the STT.¹⁸

It was also agreed upon that the STT's news reviews, now eight in number, were still broadcast. But the important thing was that now the YLE had its own radio news

the number of which was in no way limited – only certain time slots were preserved for the STT.

The YLE radio news was developed according to plans¹⁹ prepared by Ralf Friberg. He was astonished by the fact that "the STT has kept itself the advantage in news" and that in the YLE the share of news and current affairs was relatively small compared with for instance the Swedish Radio or the BBC. Car radio, portable receiver and television had changed listening habits and made radio a medium of the day and the life outside home. The American commercial radio competed with television specifically with news and music. According to Friberg, radio news service had three advantages: "rapidity, regularity and the intelligible, rousing format of radio-like news".

The YLE Administrative Council consisted of politicians and required special attention. In June 1965 it showed green light in principle for starting the news in autumn.²⁰ In summer Director General Repo prepared a memo on the basis of Friberg's plans, emphasizing that by concentrating the news in one section "the YLE is able to reach the security and objectivity of news service that is required by the responsibility laid upon the company". The Council, however, abstained from making decisions in detail but in connection with the budget for 1966.²¹

The Administrative Council took the preparations in its own hands. Its sub-committee held as many as six meetings before the budget was approved in mid-December. The extent of news service and the position of the STT roused discussions in the sub-committee, and a remark was added in the substantiation part of the budget that "the traditional STT news reviews" must be continued. In the sub-com-

mittee many representatives of the Right emphasized the preservation of the STT news. Most negative, however, was a Social Democrat saying that there was no need for an extension of news service, an increase of efficiency was enough, and that could be managed with a few more reporters.²²

Jouni Mykkänen, a radio reporter, Conservative politician and finally a YLE director, said in 1995 that YLE news was a contradictory issue for the Conservative party. It opposed Director General Repo's attempt to abolish the STT radio news but did not oppose YLE news as such.²³

Ralf Friberg, a journalist turned into a Social Democratic politician and later a diplomat, connected the reluctance of his party to a power struggle within the YLE Board and to the party's old anti-Kekkonen sentiments.²⁴ To Eino S. Repo the reasons for the Social Democrats' attitude remained a bit enigmatic, but he guessed that they might have feared that he, as a Kekkonen's man or one made Director General with the President's assistance, would make the YLE the President's mouthpiece or that the YLE would become another power base for the Centre party. On the other hand, he knew that some Social Democrats felt the news service was simply too expensive.²⁵

Anyway, in September 5th, 1965 the first YLE radio news bulletin was aired, and in 1966 the YLE had eleven news broadcasts every day in Finnish and in Swedish. The STT was secured four reviews a day.

The YLE, The STT and Politics

The question of the STT's position turned political the moment a discussion was opened on letting the YLE take care of all the news broadcasts on the radio. The STT

General Manager pointed at these issues in the letter quoted above, and already earlier in autumn 1964 he had said the same in a more straightforward manner in an internal STT memo. Should the YLE take care of all the radio news, it

would mean that the independent STT, familiar to the Finns for almost forty years, disappears from news programmes, and the choice of news is given to a YLE Current Affairs Section under a political Administrative Council nominated by Parliament.²⁶

What the listeners were used to and what had "always" been criticised by some within the YLE, was the STT raw news format that left power to the sources – and fit well in the YLE management's cautious 1950s style attempt to withdraw from potential controversies. That style was quite the contrary to the way of thinking that during the later half of the 1960s created the ideal of informational programme policy.

In the YLE Administrative Council meeting in August 1965 there was a dispute between a Conservative and a Socialist/Communist member. The Conservative feared that if the news service was given to the YLE only, it would lead to one-sidedness. He urged to preserve the STT's monopoly, because if concentrated to the STT, the news service would actually not be concentrated, he argued. Later the Conservative Parliament Group²⁷ made a formal decision to oppose an extension of the YLE news service. The Socialist member of the Council, on the other hand, felt that an YLE under parliamentary control would be a better guarantee for impartiality of news than a STT owned by newspapers.

The STT Historian Terhi Rantanen interprets the conflict as a clash between a Parliamentary model and a Private enterprise model. The YLE news were felt biased because the company's highest decision maker, the Administrative Council,

was political. The STT news were felt biased because of the lack of parliamentary decision making. Rantanen quotes a Liberal newspaper that put into words a not uncommon rightist opinion that "the leadership of the Radio wants to reserve for itself the possibility to give the news a certain tendency by choice, emphasis and bias", while the STT only told the facts.²⁸

The discussion about the YLE news calmed down as the YLE Administrative Council decided to preserve the STT's four daily reviews and did not allow the YLE to totally take over the radio news service in the way the company's management had planned. However, echoes of this discussion could be heard where ever Repo's YLE was battered. A Liberal MP and a member of the YLE's Programme Council and a former member of the Administrative Council said in 1967 in a Parliament Debate²⁹ on the YLE:

As the Testvisio [a commercial private tv channel, 1957-64] was abolished and the YLE got itself a monopoly, the STT was the only organ outside the YLE that was able to spread uncensored information. So it was the STT's turn to fall into the firing line. The STT news reviews were and are reliable. Is that the reason they did not appeal to the YLE management? And so the nibbling started. Director General Repo planned a giant upheaval. The YLE should build a network of its own, not only in our own country but also abroad, and with its help hold the news material of the world in its hands.

Naturally the speaker's party, which else, saved the Finnish people from that horrible brainwash, and the STT was secured those four daily chances to tell the pure truth. And:

An observant listener clearly notices the difference of quality in these broadcasts. The STT news are matter-fact and objective while the YLE news often contain politically biased material. They are not always im-

partial, neither in matters of domestic nor foreign policy. They are so often one-sided and not free of a tendency.

In his memoirs Eino S. Repo estimates that the members of the Administrative Council who opposed the YLE news, acted in favour of their backers and not in favour of the company they were administering. His line of argumentation leads to the parties and through them to party newspapers, who relied on the STT news service which to a large part was reliant on the money from the YLE. As another reason Repo sees the politicians' mistrust for any activity of which they could not in advance be sure which political group it would gain.³⁰

A rather similar but broader analysis was made by Ralf Friberg to the Programme Council already in 1965:³¹

In a historical perspective one may say that no country where the radio and the press have existed side by

side, has been able to avoid a kind of crisis situation in news services. This may be explained by the fact that in most countries the national news agency was, and still is, owned by the press. The press has felt that the radio's quick news service was a threat against the existence of the press, and this has created most severe controversies.

Throughout the latter half of the 1960s there were talks on cutting down the STT news broadcasts, but the pattern negotiated in 1965 has prevailed till this day. The STT still has regular daily news bulletins on the YLE radio channels. Ralf Friberg says³² that the controversy ended in 1968, as the STT recognised the YLE's special needs and the YLE the STT's position as an independent national news agency, and both parties jointly and publicly praised their "in fact good and confidential business relationship and many-sided cooperation".³³

Notes

1. This article is based on material from my book *Aikansa oloinen. Yleisradion historia 1949-1996* (Alike its Times. A History of the Finnish Broadcasting Company, 1949-1996). WSOY 1996.
2. A memo on radio news, 29.10.1943, by Jussi Koskiluoma, Oiva Ruusuvoori and Christoffer Schildt. YLE H9:1 ELKA.
3. Terhi Rantanen, *STT:n uutisia*, 1987 p.35-38, 83-84.
4. Radiokuuntelija 8/1956 p.5.
5. The theme lists are in file YLE Päivän peili 4 ELKA.
6. Pirkko Tulppo, *Radioamatööreista tajuntateollisuudeksi*, 1976 p.239-240; The STT's reply 23.10.1960 to a Parliament Inquiry by the Opposition Faction of Social Democrats. YLE 2267 ELKA.
7. A copy of the Inquiry by Mauri Ryömä et al., 3.3.1956. YLE 2267 ELKA.
8. YLE board minutes 17.3.1956 and Appendix 36.
9. YLE Board minutes 12.11.1960 and appendices 300-301.
10. The reply by the STT/E.A. Berg 23.10.1960 to the Speaker of Parliament on the Inquiry. YLE 2267 ELKA.
11. Kalevi Kilpi's preface and interval speaks, 3.1.1957. YLE Polttopisteessä 17 ELKA.
12. Chief Editor Pentti Sorvali on foreign policy thinking, 3.1.1957. YLE Polttopisteessä 17 ELKA.
13. Programme meeting minutes 17.5. and 29.5.1963. YLE H1:4 ELKA.
14. Programme meeting minutes 31.7.1963. YLE H1:4 ELKA.
15. Interviews with Ralf Friberg 29.8.1994 and Eino S. Repo 11.5.1995.

16. Kullervo Killinen 30.12.1964 to Jussi Koski-
luoma. YLE F2:9 ELKA.
17. YLE Board minutes 11.5.1965 and appendix
104; The additional agreement on Reuters,
12.5.1965, is in the file YLE H13:3 ELKA;
Papers on preliminary stages are in the file
YLE H11:1 ELKA.
18. Interview with Ralf Friberg 29.8.1994.
19. YLE Board minutes 11.5.1965 and appendix
106.
20. YLE Administrative Council minutes 4.6.
1965 and appendix 14.
21. YLE Administrative Council minutes 13.8.
1965 and appendix 17.
22. YLE Administrative Council minutes 21.12.
1965 and appendix 31; Sub-committee
minutes 15.12.1965.
23. Interview with Jouni Mykkänen 8.5.1995.
24. Interview with Ralf Friberg 29.8.1994.
25. Interview with Eino S. Repo 11.5.1995.
26. Quoted according to Rantanen (1980 p.129-
130); she quotes a memo by Kullervo Killi-
nen, 12.10.1964.
27. Conservative Parliament Group minutes
25.11.1965. Kok Ca 11 PTA.
28. Rantanen 1980 p.130-132.
29. Parliament minutes 1967 p.925 (Sept. 29).
30. Eino S. Repo, *Pöytäkirjat*, 1975 p.220-221.
31. Ralf Friberg's account for the Programme
Council on news services , 13.12.1965. YLE
H13:1 ELKA.
32. Interview with Ralf Friberg 29.8.1994.
33. YLE Board minutes 21.11.1968 and appen-
dix 256.

