

Maarit Jaakkola

Building bridges in societal debates

Conciliatory journalism as a way of covering conflict-sensitive issues

A recent research project in Tampere, Finland, has invited journalists to elaborate on the concept of “conciliatory journalism” – a form of journalism that is designed to oppose the polarisation of debates, in particular concerning conflict-sensitive issues such as religion and minorities. The starting point for the project was that none of the researchers or journalists involved had answers for how to be “conciliatory”.

The idea of such journalism emerged after the 2015 Parliamentary elections in Finland, when the populist and nationalist-oriented Finns Party became the second largest party after the Centre Party, surpassing the National Coalition Party.

The results were greeted with astonishment by many. Well-known figures commented in the media about how they did not know anybody who would have voted for the “True Finns”, as the party was still called at that time. A discussion on “bubbles” in society followed: people seemed to live in their own realities that were in conflict with each other, a phenomenon that recurred later in the case of Brexit and the U.S. presidential elections with the triumph of Trump.

Journalists appeared to be perplexed too. They reacted to the situation by tightening their policies: they reacted to the situation by tightening their policies, for instance by closing down online discussions.

“We felt that there was a certain anxiousness arising, both among journalists and journalism researchers, and we shared their com-

mon concern: is there anything that we could do about this?” recalls Mikko Hautakangas, a researcher who is part of the Conciliatory Journalism Project at the University of Tampere, Finland.

The Finnish Kone Foundation, established in 1956 by the Herlin brothers (who are executives at the elevator and escalator manufacturer Kone Corporation), has in recent years been financing research projects with multi- and interdisciplinary approaches that cross the boundaries between scholarly and professional practice. The foundation finances projects in the humanities, social sciences, environmental research and artistic research and describes the projects as “bold initiatives”. According to the foundation, boldness refers to “being open to what is new” and “taking risks”, which may then lead to “unexpected combinations of perspectives”.¹

Indeed, such research projects that involve and engage professional practitioners for collaboration have been on the increase. In Tampere, too, there have been other projects on practice-related research that involves

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1. <http://www.koneensaatio.fi/en/koneen-saatio/what-we-believe-in/>. [Accessed 20 April 2017.]



SATU SEPPÄ

Researchers Mikko Hautakangas and Laura Ahva (in the back) discussing forms of anti-polarising journalism with journalists Ann-Mari Sinisalo, left, and Tuija Veirto in a workshop in Kouvola, South-Eastern Finland.

practitioners. For example, a large project on journalistic documentary theatre was funded by the Kone Foundation in 2013–2015, which brought together journalism researchers and theatre professionals to interrogate combinations of fact-based and fictional storytelling.

Negotiating between roles

The method adopted by the Conciliatory Journalism Project is action research. With the help of interactive inquiry, the goal is to collaborate in order to develop journalistic practices that meet the challenges of public debate, online environments in particular, the challenges being the incompatibility of discourses on account of differing worldviews, aggressiveness and hate speeches, and escalating tensions.

From the start, the aim of the project has been to develop work practices for journalists, but the researchers did not initially have a concrete concept of what the work practices could be. Therefore, they started the project with an open question: what are we doing when we practise “conciliatory journalism”

and is it worth practising? The participants also attended the workshops with questions.

The project has been carried out in the form of workshops in four cities around Finland. Before launching the project, the researchers imagined that the conciliatory attitude would be especially helpful in long-form articles that need extensive background research. On the contrary, it seems that there is an equally strong, if not an even stronger, need for instructions and policies for journalistic conduct in short-term news projects that lead to “scandals” and “hypes” in the public sphere.

“Many journalists are worried about the potential unanticipated and unintended consequences of their actions. They do not want to do things that re-enforce intolerance, discrimination and other negative effects”, explains **Laura Ahva**.

The journalists involved in the Conciliatory Journalism Project are working on two types of tasks: single stories that reflect the concept of the “conciliatory” approach, or development projects that help create policies and instructions for journalists in the news-

rooms. It seems that conciliatory approaches are most frequently needed in the coverage of environmental, health and minority issues.

Same-sex marriage in the Lutheran church, the use of wind energy, wolf hunting, and different forms of alternative medicine are some of the themes covered in the workshops so far.

Through these workshops, the researchers attempt to facilitate the development of ideas. Therefore, it was essential to prepare the workshop in a language that journalists would be familiar with.

“We ourselves are constantly negotiating between the roles of a researcher, educator and consultant”, says Mikko Hautakangas, and continues, “In the workshops, the educator and consultant roles take over, as we always have observers in the classrooms who take notes that can be used for analysis later, but we later fall back on researchers. This dynamic is an essential part of the method”.

“We need to be highly aware of our roles. But this is also true for journalists practising conciliatory journalism: they need to have clarity about how they position themselves towards the conflictual debates they facilitate”, remarks Laura Ahva.

The theoretical framework of the project combines elements of journalism, online media and speech communication studies.

“Especially inspiring are the concepts of ‘mediation’ and ‘listening’ from speech communication studies. With the help of these concepts, we aim to provide a means for journalists to create a public discussion that appreciates plurality but is not aggressive. The aim of our approach is, therefore, not to reach a consensus, but rather, to ease tension in the public sphere”, summarizes Laura Ahva.

Just one more “ism”?

In the field of journalism and journalism research, an abundance of new “isms” have emerged during recent years. These include approaches that aspire to find alternatives to the negative worldview of journalism, such as constructive journalism, solutions journalism, and positive news. Conciliatory journalism bears similarities to these. However, the researchers remain sceptical of coining a new “ism”.

“We have tried hard not to brand a new ‘ism’. However, in practice, the Finnish term ‘sovittelujournalismi’ is a catchy word and has become an essential keyword for those involved in the workshops”, the researchers observe.

Some journalists, in addition, have envisioned the concept as an instrument for branding themselves and finding a niche in the journalism ecology, which may be helpful for the development of their career.

Challenges for future workshops include the moderation of online discussions. Journalists will be encouraged to play a more active role and, thus, share more responsibility in facilitating, directing and mediating discussions rather than just enabling discussions by opening an online forum.

“The big challenge is how to make post-publishing engagement by the audience function as a real discussion instead of just aggressive remarks thrown around. One solution is to identify functions and areas where automation can be of help.”

When the project is completed in 2018, journalists can expect a list of the best practices and advice on the interplay between practical experience and theoretical inquiry.

Conciliatory journalism in practice: what do the journalists say?

Participants of the Conciliatory Journalism workshops talk about their experiences in developing conciliatory journalism:

“In our newspaper circulated in the northwestern coast of Finland, among the most typical sensitive topics are the use of wind energy and nuclear power, as well as coastal building. The windy coast of Northern Ostrobothnia is a wonderland for windmills, and we typically write stories about wind power, covering both pros and cons based on facts. For example, we have written about the health effects experienced by the inhabitants and

told stories about people who have been forced to move away from the neighbourhood of the windfarms, but we have also heard experts who assess that infrasounds do not cause any negative health effects.

What makes the idea of conciliatory journalism further interesting for us is that Finland's third nuclear power plant is currently being constructed in our circulation area. I think that the workshop gave me ideas about how to mediate between extreme views: for example, a live panel discussion organized by the local paper might drive the discussion further. However, I feel that in terms of nuclear power the views are too far away from each other to be conciliated with the help of journalistic means.

Nina Tuomikoski, news producer at the local newspaper Raahen Seutu

“I had been thinking of doing this kind of journalism for years, and the workshop gave me tools to develop my ideas further. It also helped me to create a network of journalists in Finland and abroad with whom to exchange ideas. I prefer the term ‘conciliatory’ to ‘constructive’ or ‘solutions’ journalism because I think it describes better the new role journalists should take on as mediators. I think the term ‘constructive’ is too vague and the term ‘solutions journalism’ too simple to describe the idea. Journalists should start covering the conciliatory process, and not just present a clear-cut solution, which may never happen in such a clear way that it could be described in shocking headlines.

To put the idea into practice, I have gathered a group of young journalists outside of the workshop. We plan to launch a new online medium centred around the idea of conciliatory journalism, which focuses on intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The medium, which is to be launched this year, will be the first of its kind in Finland. In addition to building conciliatory approaches in journalistic stories, we will also help people meet each other in real life by organizing events.

Noora Kettunen, freelance journalist based in Helsinki

“In a democracy, it is crucial that we are able to sort out conversations that have started going around in circles and open up them to a more open public debate. Within the traditional frame of journalism it is difficult enough for a journalist to approach sensitive topics. Am I unbiased enough? Am I too unbiased? Will I eventually be regarded as an advocate for the topic? Among the holders of different viewpoints, whose truth is less true?

In the conciliatory journalism approach I felt it liberating that while writing a story about alternative medicines I did not have to bring the discussion to an end, or find a univocal solution or an absolute truth. Instead, what I could search for was to increase understanding and identify facts that both parties could agree upon, even if their ideologies differed a great deal from each other.

And I guess that is what happened, too. The interviewees said that they considered the discussion constructive and it was carried out in a good atmosphere, which made me feel that I had succeeded exceptionally well. From the listeners, too, we got explicitly positive feedback. There is a strong need for a journalistic attitude that takes people one step further away from conflicts.

Matleena Ylikoski, journalist at the Finnish Broadcasting Company YLE in Jyväskylä