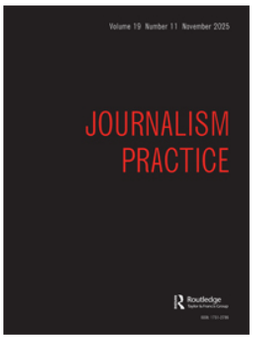

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Who is the News-Consuming Child? How Producers of Children's Journalism Construct their Audience

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ABSTRACT

Journalists who produce news for children must balance the professional ideals and demands of journalism and the particularities of producing news for this audience. In order to gain new knowledge on how journalists envision their child audiences and the roles and meanings of children's journalism in a landscape marked by pervasive media and declining literacy skills, we interviewed journalists working on five Finnish news media products for children launched between 2016 and 2021. Finland offers an interesting case study, as the country is marked by a high trust in news, a recent uptick in news products for children aged 8–13, and ambitious goals for media literacy.

Our findings show that journalists envision children's journalism as an ideal rather than a service, product, or format. As part of this ideal, journalists view the child as a subject who will learn to navigate everyday life, society, and the contemporary "threat landscape" with the help of journalism. This ideal is marked by an ambivalence towards the capabilities and vulnerabilities of the child and a universalist gaze on childhood, and it drives an image of the journalist as a soothing mentor who helps the child cope with the challenging times.

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Introduction

Many media companies today express an interest in young audiences by launching children's news products ranging from print newspaper sections to multimedia news sites. With these initiatives companies want to gain access into children's digitalized everyday lives with the aim to provide fact-based information about the world. Metrics and analytics can aid this process by generating information on the audience and the ways they use content (e.g., Blanchett Neheli 2018; Ahva and Ovaska 2023), but only to a certain extent. Particularly, in small media markets, media companies may lack adequate resources to conduct extensive audience research, requiring the newsroom team to be actively engaged in thinking about who their audiences are and how to better identify which segments of the target group are not being reached. This is particularly true for newsrooms that prioritize non-digital products such as subscription newspapers.

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The identification of and search for new readers, followers, subscribers, fans, and "friends' is a more straightforward project for niche products, such as children's news, than for generic news media, as the target group tends to be clearly defined according to age, interest, location, or some other characteristic. This more targeted scope can, however, result in a narrow conceptualization of the potential user and subscriber. For example, previous research on children's media has shown that children's news tends to cater primarily to upper-middle-class children, both with regard to content (Haavisto, Chajed, and Kyllönen 2022), and in how "ideal" users are constructed by producers (as "mature, academically able and middle class", according to Matthews [2003, 5]).

There are several possible reasons for this segmented and narrow view of the audience: the professional culture; efforts to maximize profit and visibility; company-specific conventions; suggestions from international news consultants; journalists' own socio-economic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; and the personal and ideologically colored conceptions of the child and childhood that news media professionals hold and construct.

This last point is what we aim to explore, namely, how media professionals involved in newsroom work envision the child. Drawing on the ideas of the audience as imagined (Hartley 2002) and as discursive constructs influenced by hegemonic relations (Foucault 1972), conceptions of the child can influence how the target group is defined, how a journalistic product is developed, and how young audiences are addressed in and through journalism. They also influence which stories are picked up and which are not, and ultimately who is given a voice, visibility, and recognition.

Finland offers an interesting case study, as the trust in the news is exceptionally high in the country, partially because the news is not as politically polarized as elsewhere (Reunanen 2024). Finns' high trust in the news resonates with a political goodwill for educating children about fact-based storytelling. Examples of this development are the several literacy competence policies for children that have recently been introduced (Kuusisto et al. 2022; OPH 2021; Finnish National Agency for Education n.d.). Yet, another example of the interest in the children's relation to news, is the launch of five journalistic products for children between 2016 and 2021, including both traditional print (*HBL Junior* and *Apu Juniori*) and multiplatform products (*Yle Mix, Yle Watt Nytt, HS Lasten uutiset*).

Previous studies on children's journalism in Finland have explored content, storytelling practices, and collaborations with other institutions such as schools (Haavisto, Chajed, and Kyllönen 2022; Jaakkola 2020; Puro 2014), but we do not know for whom these recently launched journalistic products for children are made. Nor do we know how this envisioning of the audience affects how journalists view themselves professionally, or the type of journalism they produce. To fill this gap, we carried out interviews with Finnish news media professionals working in the established news media industry. In a time marked not only by an uptick in children's news, but also by increased international insecurity and deep concerns for declining literacy skills, we asked news media professionals how they relate to children as audiences, social actors, and rights holders.

The Particularities of Children's Media

Children's news in general and the production of children's news media in particular are understudied (English et al. 2019). While Buckingham (2008) noted that only a small number of studies have focussed empirically on media producers' perspectives of their

audiences, Strohmaier (2007), Lemish (2007; 2010), Lemish and Götz (2022), Matthews (2003; 2010), and Alon-Tirosh (2017) have taken up this topic, forming a strand of research to which we align ourselves.

Focusing on the production side of news media for children, the aforementioned scholars have shown that media producers feel the need to juggle various types of challenges on a daily basis. Such challenges may include the oftentimes complicated relationship with affiliated news products for adults; expectations of profitability for commercial products or reach for public service products; and the need to be approachable and child-inclusive, while at the same time gently authoritative, for example, by providing coverage on war and conflicts while limiting disturbing coverage of suffering or dying children (Alon-Tirosh 2017; Strohmaier 2007). When it comes to news-selection processes and content-related challenges, research shows a gap between the professional ideals and demands of journalism (such as neutrality, truth, and informing the public) and the particularities of producing news for child audiences, which requires age-adapted reporting, consolation strategies, and even some degree of pedagogical competency (Jaakkola 2020; Nikken and Walma van der Molen 2007). In practice, this means that producers of children's news often face a trade-off between fully informing children and being careful to not cause distress (Kleemans and Tamboer 2022). This results in an ambiguous professional role – on the one hand informing, and on the other hand protecting – that media producers implicitly navigate when imagining their audience.

Children's journalism is thus marked by tensions between the particularities of children's needs and the broader characteristics of news "as business" or as "public debate". This finding is echoed by recent studies on children's media in Finland (Katko 2018; Kartano 2021; Kyllönen 2022; Mäkilä 2022). Representing a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, these studies show in a fairly united manner how children's news media in Finland is currently under development as a genre. Although Finland has a long history of news and current affairs products for children (e.g., Puro 2014), the current digital children's culture, with its new media usage patterns, has radically changed the context in which news is produced, used, and understood, hence making it difficult for the media producers of today to build on a legacy of products from the past. As John Potter (2020, 256) has noted, "pervasiveness has shifted the goalposts and media technologies are integral to, and embedded in, material culture and lived experience". In this new context of pervasive media, the producers of Finnish children's news journalism for the 8- to 13-year-old audience have needed to develop their product concepts from the ground up, often with Nordic products such as *SvD Junior*, *Aftenposten Junior*, and *DR Ultra Nyt* or international examples such as *BBC Newsround*, *Time for Kids*, or *The New York Times for Kids* as their point of reference, as our interviews show.

Discourses of Childhood as Constitutive of the Audience

These journalistic products for children have emerged in relation to each other, which points to how conceptualizations of young audiences overlap and intertwine within the media sphere. To conceptualize this intertwinedness as well as the idea of the "imagined audience", we ground our argument and empirical study in the realm of discourse theory (Foucault 1972). In practice, this means that, in addition to the professional circumstances briefly described earlier, more general historical and contemporary discourses of

children and childhood matter for how media producers imagine their audiences. These are often "comprised through a series of, often heterogeneous, images, representations, codes and constructs' (Jenks 2005, 29).

Sometimes these discourses run parallel in society. Other times they compete. One example of competing metalevel discourses on children are those that echo a developmental psychology perspective (e.g., Jean Piaget's essentialist ideas of children's cognitive development) versus those that stress the plurality of childhood and align themselves with the dominant discourses of contemporary childhood sociology (e.g., James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Qvortrup 1994). Certainly, from time to time, these perspectives merge and overlap.

From the perspective of discourse theory, these processes are highly influenced by hegemonic relations (Marttila 2018) – in our case, by the unequal power dynamic between children and adults and by the practices of institutions that reinforce existing dominance by reproducing discourses instead of challenging them. Hence, when examining journalists' conceptualizations of young audiences, it becomes necessary to recognize the hegemonic position of the adult journalist and the workings of discursive power, which inevitably influence assumptions about what children want and need in terms of news. While imagining their audience, journalists rely on, circulate, construct, and contest discursive regimes (see Andrejevic 2008, for discursive regimes) – in our case, discursive regimes of childhood, a process that inevitably views the child "from above".

In addition to the hegemonic character of the processes through which the audience is imagined, we need to consider another aspect of the discursive work that journalists do, namely, the juxtaposition of discourses. More precisely, the way in which journalists view their audiences relates to the way they view themselves. For example, if journalists primarily envision their audiences as learners, they may advance a vision of themselves as educators, resulting in certain types of content, perspectives, and frames. If they envision the audience as vulnerable beings, they may advance a vision of themselves as guardians or ombudsmen. In the poststructuralist discourse theoretical tradition that we engage with here the construction of "them" simultaneously constructs a "we" (Mouffe 1992).

The difference between this two-directional process in children's media and generic newsrooms is the legislative structure for children's rights (e.g., Convention on the rights of the child 1989) as well as other particularities that the producers of children's news need to take into account, such as offering an alternative to "fake news' (Carter, Steemers, and Davies 2021).

While international declarations on children's rights may not be continuously referred to in a daily newsroom setting, discourses like these create a framework for conceptualizing the "imagined audience" because the salient particularities of this niche audience have already been defined, at least partially, in law and policy (i.e., who is a child and the rights of a child). Journalists' "imaginative job" then becomes determining how to navigate and evaluate the various discourses in law and policy, drawing on their own judgement and professional culture to adapt these discourses to a particular national, local, and professional context. Journalists' discursive construction of the child in a given cultural and historical context is inextricably related to how other types of media and other institutions imagine the child. This paper addresses only a narrow part of this broader discursive process.

Method

For our study, we interviewed the producers of five recently launched children's news media products in Finland: *Lasten uutiset*, *HBL Junior*, *Yle Mix*, *Yle Watt Nytt*, and *Apu Juniori*.

The launch of *Lasten uutiset*, a video news program on the web, by the Sanoma media company in 2016 (Katko 2018) marked a new start for news programming for children in Finland. In 2020, the *Lasten uutiset* concept expanded, adding a weekly print newspaper (Sanoma Media Finland 2020). At the same time, *Hufvudstadsbladet*, the largest Swedish-language newspaper in Finland, launched *HBL Junior*, a semi-monthly print newspaper (Miettinen 2020). In parallel with these commercial ventures into children's news, the public broadcasting company Yle placed a distinct emphasis on children and young audiences in their strategy (Yle 2020a) and launched two new audiovisual journalistic products for children. In the fall of 2020, the Finnish-language news show *Yle Mix* started publishing videos on the Yle streaming platform Areena, YouTube, and the short-form video app TikTok twice a week, with extra material made exclusively for external platforms (Yle 2020b). The following spring, the semi-weekly video show *Yle Watt Nytt* premiered for the Swedish-speaking audience (Strömwall 2021). The weekly general-interest magazine *Apu* also launched its children's spinoff, *Apu Juniori*, in 2019 (A-lehdet 2018).

All of the above-mentioned products have an intended audience of elementary school–aged children, more precisely, children between the ages of 8 and 13 (A-lehdet 2018; Sanoma 2020; Miettinen 2020; Yle 2020b). With their approach of producing news in multiple formats and on multiple platforms, these initiatives, run by major media outlets, have the potential to reach a large portion of the young population in Finland. The newsrooms further engage with their audiences by collaborating with schools through programs such as reader panels and visits from journalists, and keep in touch with viewers on social media platforms.

We examined this growing and largely under-researched area of children's news media through an interview study with a semi-structured interview design (Magnusson and Marecek 2015), addressing themes such as journalists' perspectives on why children need news, children's position in society, and what constitutes a good childhood. The journalists (P1–P6) were recruited by reaching out to one or more individuals working in each newsroom, asking them to participate or to recommend a colleague more fit for the interview. Since one of the newsrooms was bigger than the others, we interviewed two journalists there, but separately. An initial set of questions was tested during a pilot interview with P1, which contributed rich data for analysis, confirming that our interview guide was suitable for our research aim. The pilot interview was therefore included in the research material, which was gathered during December 2021 and January 2022; an additional interview was conducted with P6 in March 2023. [1]

The interviews were conducted one-on-one via the Microsoft Teams video conferencing platform, in order to make use of the speech recognition software built into the service. The transcripts were then edited by one of the researchers and safely stored on a local hard disk. Prior to being interviewed, the informants were asked to give their consent to participating in the interview study.[2] They also received information on where and how the material would be stored and used. In order to protect the confidentiality of our interviewees, we do not disclose detailed background information. However,

we can state that all of them were in-house journalists in full-time positions, with experience in children's journalism ranging from one to five years. Most have a background in mainstream journalism but work in teams in which one or more members have formal pedagogical training.[3]

We approached the transcribed interviews with statement analysis (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003), meaning that we first focussed on the smallest unit of discourse, namely, statements. Statements are segments of the texts that construct objects, create subject positions, are linked to other statements and have a strategic function (Åkerstrøm Andersen 2003). These statements form discursive formations in Foucauldian terminology (Foucault 1972). Therefore, a central aspect of our analysis was to map regularities in the statements across the material in order to examine the discursive formations that they constitute.

Over several rounds of organizing, interpretation, and sense-making using the software AtlasTi, we noted several regularities, such as children's vulnerability; them becoming adults and being children; children's characteristics, needs, agency, and relationship with adults; and lastly, their uniqueness in comparison to adults.

Findings

After further examination of these regularities, four discursive formations were identified: Children as active and capable, Children as vulnerable, Children as future citizens, and Children as one. This fourth, universalist discourse that constructs children as "one" works horizontally and traverses the three other discourses. Despite the overlap, all four formations are entities with their own logics.

In the subsequent presentation of the findings, we will further discuss these four discourses. We have translated the quotes from either Finnish or Swedish – the two national languages in which the interviews were held – to English.

Children as Active and Capable

When analysing the journalists' statements, we noted a prominent discursive formation around children as clever, active, and capable.

> The children are very smart. That is somehow what they have in common. / … / Of course, there are the types who sort of stay in their childhood and their innocence for a very long time, / … / but overall, they are extremely knowledgeable about the world and trends, but not necessarily about the adult news world. (P4)

The journalists described interacting with an audience that is present in the here and now, endowed with a realistic perception of the world, and has the skills and competences needed to navigate its environment: they "know even more than the adults give them credit for" (P6). The "digitally native" generation is literate "on its own" and has the ability to critically decode communication directed at them. Journalists expressed trust that children are capable of making sense of society and the world.

> It can't be that children only have access to very few [media channels]. Of course, children's books are very important. They also tell a lot about how the world functions, but they might not address important current phenomena like a newspaper does. In a certain way, it's about

> showing a certain respect to children, to give them access to the same news, so that they understand what is happening, and understand what adults are talking about, in a way that is suitable for them. (P2)

The discourse of the "capable child" is grounded in knowledge of developmental psychology and of the distractions in the everyday lives of children and young people, as the following statement shows.

> We know that they are very fast at decoding information. It has to be of a particular length for them to have the energy to focus, meaning they will easily change [to other content] if it is not relevant for them. (P3)

The contradiction between the capable child and the developing mind in the statements above highlights how children, in the interview material, are positioned on a scale with agency and capability at one end and adult-led support and adaptive techniques at the other. In other words, children are positioned as media users who have the ability to identify content of interest to them, but who also have certain limits, as their developing minds require adults to adapt formats and content for them. Consequently, going too far with adapting the news for children may hinder them from actually using their capabilities and skills, which strengthens the idea of the child as vulnerable.

Children as Vulnerable

Our analysis revealed that vulnerability is constructed as something broader than children being easily exposed to various types of concrete harm if not adequately cared for by adults. Instead, vulnerability is seen as an inseparable aspect of growing up, due to an innate sensitivity towards potentially harmful relations, phenomena, and events that the child may experience. According to the informants, a large part of their journalistic work is ongoing negotiations with themselves and others on what may cause the child distress and how to alleviate that distress.

The following statement illustrates the conflict that can sometimes emerge between doing journalistic work and protecting children:

> I thought about it a lot, knowing for certain that they knew about it [the war in Ukraine], but I considered what I was supposed to tell them and how, while not making it too frightening for them. [The media product I work on] has, in general, other topics such as the climate crisis that require us to tell what's happening but in a way that won't increase their anxiety. (P6)

The statement above illustrates how these negotiations tend to center around the idea of how childhood innocence can be lost if "too much" knowledge is shared with children. The dilemma that the producers articulate is how not to make things worse with their reporting. The limits on what is allowed of journalistic reports and what topics the journalists are asked to refrain from beg the question of what the adults in question view the children as capable of handling.

> I think it [the emergence of news products for children] has to do with the commonly debated need for media literacy – misinformation, disinformation. It's generally about how adults long ago lost the game of where children get their information and where they spend their time. And anyway, we adults want the best for them in regards to knowledge and skills to perceive the world, and somehow, I feel like the basic journalistic ethos – if we stop and think about precious values and what journalism is about, it is, in a way,

> about reaching towards a better and clearer and somehow also a fairer world, and one [value] is definitely about the right to information. And, for example, when our product was launched, we did read the children's rights convention. (P4)

This statement positions adults as subjects who were once capable of control over the young population in regards to what they were exposed to and limiting the spaces available to them in their spare time. Now, this idyl has been broken due to technological development, leaving children susceptible to the outside world and in need of protection and rescuing from what is feared to be happening to them.

> They [the children] need to be put back on track from time to time, not in a way that is condescending to them, or preaching to them what is correct, but in a way that actually tells them how some things work. (P3)

The statement by P3 is illustrative of the discursive formation of statements that articulate a fear of "them" – the children – being inevitably "lost". In this particular statement, P3 is talking about the risk that adults, and more precisely parents, will impose their own "harmful" world views on their children. This ties to the wider societal construction of children as tabulae rasae – blank slates – who are positioned in a protected sphere (see e.g., Kehily 2004, 5; Haudrup Christensen 2000, 40 for more on this reasoning). This sphere, or "walled garden" (Holt 2013, 12), is of a "timeless" nature, where the purity of the children prevails as it is locked away from the outside world (James and Prout 2015, 212).

In judging the parents' worldviews as potentially harmful to the child, journalists interfere with the implied unit of the family, which in contemporary notions of childhood is centered as the main unit for the protected socialization of children (Haudrup Christensen 2000). Children's news allows journalists to bypass parents and descend to the level of children, not in a condescending manner, but instead with respect and goodwill. Analysing the statement as a whole, this goodwill comes from a place where children are articulated as drifting objects who do not yet possess the ability to assess knowledge critically on their own, thus putting their agency into question. The children's news – as a product, but also as a "friend"– is then painted as the children's peer, assisting them in sorting out the right from the wrong. The journalists' articulations follow a logic in which children who are at risk of "getting lost" are gently guided back towards innocence, since efforts to keep the children's world secluded have failed. In this reasoning, news functions somewhat paradoxically as a safe haven from the outside world. The journalists see news for children as a reliable and fortifying power in the midst of scary and corrupting forces such as illiteracy, "post-factuality", violent behavior, and weakening democracy.

Children as Future Citizens

The third major discourse emerging from the data centers around the idea of children being on a path towards adulthood. This highly future-oriented discourse is anchored in the idea of the biologically immature child (see, e.g., James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 17; Rosen 2020). Statements in which children are primarily seen as being on a path to adulthood echo a view of the underdeveloped child, who gradually will reach the endpoint – adulthood (Prout 2004). This developmental perspective is a functional framework in everyday news work, which separates children into different categories according to

their level of cognitive maturity. This "signposting" is typically Piagetian, and consequently draws a distinction between the adult and the child, who is still on the path to becoming a fully formed human being (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 18). This developmental psychology model is criticized in contemporary childhood studies for its Western perspective of what constitutes a cognitively competent person, and also because children in fact possess abilities at a younger age than the model assumes (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 18; Archard 2015, 89).

In statements referencing developmental stages, the informants inevitably construct normative timelines of childhood, as the quote below shows:

> Although I earlier said that I don't want to talk about children and adults, there is a big difference between children and adults, and I don't know at what stage they move on to become this negative adult person, because children always start from what's good. (P1)

The statement above builds on a logic wherein, on their timeline towards adulthood, children progress as individuals with good intentions, but at some point during this maturation, they lose what is otherwise inherent to them: goodness. At this feared shift during their development, the barrier between the two worlds – the innocent "child's world" and cruel reality – is eventually broken. The point of view of such discourses that address the transition from childhood into adulthood is that of the temporary nature of childhood. As James and Prout (2015, 209) argue, childhood becomes merely a stage on the path to adulthood, with children expected to transition from being a child to being an adult. Thus, childhood is viewed from the perspective of the future, constructing childhood as important only in relation to what it means for becoming an adult (James and Prout 2015, 210).

Apart from the articulations drawing on developmental theories, statements constructing this particular discursive formation also link children's development to understanding their cultural and political heritage and to citizenship skills. The journalists discussed in various ways how important it is that children are supported on their path towards citizenship, a task concretely characterized as "active citizenship education" by P6. In these statements, the adults express a feeling of great responsibility in taking on a mentoring role:

> Children want to know how the world functions, and they want to learn to be smart actors in the world, and it [the news] should at least be a tool for that. In a way, it's about children's rights: they have the right to know what's going on in the world. They are the future of the world, and soon they will take it over and know how to operate, and the earlier they have access to sensible, trustworthy information that is explained in a way they can understand, the better. (P2)

In the quote above, P2 constructs a dichotomy between childhood and adulthood in which children's present abilities are distinct from their future obligations. The statement encompasses an adult fantasy of the future, an objective that James, Jenks, and Prout (1998, 203) attach to the discourse on continuity and change, including the hopes inherent to "cultural reproduction" that Bourdieu tied to education, and furthermore to the securing of the dominant culture (204). In this mass socialization, children are in fact equipped with agency due to the expectations adults have of them "taking over" one day (James, Jenks, and Prout 1998, 204). In this discourse, journalism helps raise children to become future advocates of democracy.

Children as One: the Universalist Discourse

The discursive formation of the universal child solidifies the idea that a particular perspective can legitimately serve every child because it is perceived by adults as of interest to "everyone". This discourse traverses the three previous discourses and is driven by generalizations and simplifications, which often happen in passing. For example, journalists may say that children are not interested in "dull, adult topics' such as government press releases because children have their "own world" that does not encompass certain topics. These two separate spheres of society – the "adult world" and the "child's world" – intersect only when adults make decisions affecting children, such as restrictions at the height of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 and 2021, or when compulsory education was extended in Finland in 2021.

> When the news is customized for children, it probably also has content from the children's world. Or is related to children's interests. Sure, they can put on the 8:30 evening news and watch it like anyone else because it is made for everyone, even though we speak about it as news for adults. But to be fair, few of us adults when putting the news on and listening to the budget negotiations understand anything that's being said, and especially now when we're having county elections for the first time, many probably wonder what's going on, so I feel that it is our duty to offer children content that truly interests them, so that we aren't just simplifying / … / some government press info, but that we're look into what's going on in the children's world because those are the children's news, be it about schools trying out sport activities in the middle of the day or about how Covid restrictions affect schools. (P5)

The "children's world" painted by the journalists builds on idea that playfulness, the capacity to experience the ordinary as "magical", eagerness to learn, and the right to be protected are things that unite children irrespective of background and nationality. These aspects are built into a construct of children as one – as universal beings who share something with each other that adults cannot partake in.

Although naming an audience usually also involves homogenizing it (Hartley 2002), the narrow construct of the child as one affirms earlier research that shows that children's media tend to cater to a homogeneous group in terms of ethnicity, culture, and class (Coulter 2021; Matthews 2003). At the same time, the formation shows that there is also a tendency in the newsroom to see children as a homogenous group when it comes to their cognitive development and developmental stages. Though childhood scholars have long suggested the idea of plural childhoods (Qvortrup 1994), the journalists seemed to hold to the one childhood concept.

Discussion: Children's Journalism as an Ideal

Our findings show that the producers' discourses on capabilities, vulnerabilities, and active citizenship, permeated by universalist views of the child, swing back and forth like a pendulum. These fluctuating discourses echo broader conceptualisations of the child as innocent victim versus the child as competent social actor (Buckingham and Willett 2022), and through them, the producers indirectly join in with the balancing act of seeing children as a social group in need of protection as well as a group in need of support in their autonomy.

This balancing act pertains to an idealistic view of the role of children's journalism in the lives of children and in contemporary society, and it builds upon a dualism of, on

the one hand, the idea of a "good childhood" (Wagner and Einarsdottir 2008) and policies and international treaties on children's rights, and, on the other hand, the idea of children's journalism as an aid to help children navigate everyday life, society, and contemporary threats. The "threat landscape" constructed through the discourses encompasses various sorts of digital harms and phenomena that weaken democracy. Ideally, journalism for children then emerges as a counterforce to tendencies in society that weaken democracy, such as propaganda, disinformation, weak reading skills, and a growing disconnect between youth and society.

With this optimistic, even celebratory, envisioning of the power of news media to help children cope with challenges in their everyday lives and the surrounding world, journalism represents itself as an ideal, rather than a format or practice.

As we know from previous studies, however, ideals do not always feed into practice. For example, in Coleman's (2011) study, when journalists were asked about protecting children's privacy and keeping them from harm, they expressed great concern, but when they were observed in newsroom settings, they did not actually demonstrate significantly higher levels of moral judgement for children than adults. In addition, as international research on general journalism shows, journalists are keen to pacify "the people in charge of their careers: their bosses" (Litt 2012). Accordingly, an idealistic view of how children's journalism can educate, protect, and raise future citizens may be a narrative that serves many purposes.

Although journalism is primarily envisioned as an ideal with utopian features, there is another, more practice-oriented side to the story as well. This perspective is highlighted in situations where the vocabulary of vulnerability, agency, and future citizenship takes on a consumerist twist, with journalists suggesting that consumer loyalty needs to be built up from an early age. When striving to create loyal customers, they claim, news-oriented media needs to compete for attention within the wider sphere of children's media, such as games, on-demand international children's entertainment, and social media that prioritizes user content. This competition occasionally leads children's news producers to make compromises between informing users and creating pure entertainment.

This consumerist logic is perhaps the best way to understand the role of the universalist discourse. As children in Finland are socialized into a global children's media culture that erases cultural symbols and signs that would mark the text as foreign or national for consumerist purposes (see Chan et al. 2013, 213), so do Finnish producers put aside particularistic views and instead see children as "one". This may happen unknowingly, and parallel explanations are likely to play a role as well, but the end result is the same, namely, that talk about children as "one" overshadows their pluralities and thus risks excluding children of a different gender, social class, or ethnicity than the majority audience.

Interestingly, the journalists did acknowledge one particularity among the children in their audience: regional differences, often between metropolitan areas and the rest of Finland. Consequently, the journalists consider how to cater their content to audiences in all parts of Finland. One possible reason for this differentiation may be that when constructing a niche news media audience on a national level, media companies see greater consumerist potential in the more remote regions of Finland than in audiences not made up of White, middle-class, Evangelical Lutheran children. This explanation supports the argument that particularities in children and children's lives are seen only when there

is a consumerist underpinning. In other words, if it pays off, the construct of children as "one" may be temporarily abandoned.

Cook (2004, 7) has previously described the child as a "figment of the commercial imagination" and shown how diversity is intertwined with a consumerist logic when producing the image of the child to meet the needs of the cultural industries pertaining to children, such as advertising, marketing, media, retail, and technology. However, what is noteworthy in the case of journalism for children is how smoothly neoliberal values and ethics mix in the journalists' statements. This happens irrespective of whether the journalist works in public service broadcasting or not. It seems to be equally important for different kinds of media companies to attract audiences and generate loyalty.

How, then, do journalists envision their role within this predominantly idealist but occasionally also pragmatic view of their audience? Within the discursive framework of ongoing negotiations regarding the vulnerabilities and capabilities of the child, the position of the journalist resembles that of a mentor. Journalist-mentors guide their mentees through their everyday surroundings, acquainting them with more and less familiar places, events, and phenomena, and striving to build long-lasting bonds built on loyalty, respect, and common interests. The journalist-mentor is curious and mediates curiosity, but does not want to take responsibility for children's education, and should therefore not be seen as a pedagogue (see also Jaakkola 2020). Neither is the journalist-mentor "just a journalist", providing information according to basic ethical guidelines, but without more extensive concern for the emotions, reactions, and consequences of a particular story or perspective. Rather, the opposite is true, as the mentor continuously adapts content and smooths over stories according to universal guidelines on children's rights and genre-specific conventions such as consolation (see Kleemans and Tamboer 2022) in order to cater to developing minds.

A mentor guides his or her mentees with seniority, knowledge, and engagement, while striving to create a long-lasting bond wherein the mentee can grow. Mentoring is not altruism, as the mentor also derives benefits from the mentorship, such as fresh viewpoints or status. Similarly, the journalist ideally gains a "loyal friend" and a feeling of ethical relief for producing trustworthy content to counterbalance disinformation, "fake news', and other types of digital harm. This idealistic view of the producer–audience relation as mentorship is central to understanding contemporary children's journalism. The mentorship ideal steers newsroom negotiations of appropriateness and purpose. It influences the selection of content and the perspectives taken, and helps the producers to articulate goals. Indeed, it seems to be the primary definer of the format, more so than other values negotiated and applied in contemporary generic news journalism, such as balance, independence, and honesty.

In this view, journalism for children is defined as ethical and responsible, and sets out to protect the vulnerable child, while at the same time, keeping the child informed. Accordingly, journalism for children is envisioned as a key player in the societal push to "save" a generation of children, seen as at risk of faltering under the pressure of threats both internal (related to the child's cognitive development) and external (related to negative interference). At the same time, the protection provided by journalists cannot be all-encompassing, as the news must also support children in becoming autonomous thinkers and supporters of democracy. Hence, the news, with the help of the journalist-mentor,

socializes children into an ideal, Nordic type of citizenship and a "good childhood", which requires not only protection, but also agency and civic skills now and in the future.

Conclusion

Drawing on poststructuralist discourse theory, we have examined how producers of children's news in Finland construct their audiences, position the news in relation to children, and simultaneously construct their own professional selves as journalist-mentors. Our findings show that the producers of children's news media in Finland see their audience as both agentive within the political economic structures of society, and vulnerable and in need of protection. In fact, journalist-mentors continuously balance between the need to protect children and the need to support their autonomy.

Through these continuous negotiations around vulnerabilities and capabilities, children's journalism is primarily defined as an ideal rather than a practice or a format. Accordingly, journalists' articulations connote a strong normativeness, echoing guideposts in policies and international treaties on children's rights as relate to literacy, communicative rights, and the protection of children in general.

While such high standards are valuable in providing ethical direction, they risk oversimplifying the complexities of children's diverse experiences, identifications, and aspirations. Further developing the idea of the journalist-mentor, perhaps through collaboration with children, may help foster practices that are more inclusive and responsive to diverse realities.

Notes

1. Five of the six interviews in our material have previously been analysed in an unpublished master's thesis (Kyllönen 2022).
2. Our study did not deviate from the principle of informed consent, and it did not contain any other element that would require ethical review according to the guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019, p. 19). Accordingly, we did not need an ethical review statement for our research design.
3. The Nordic countries are forerunners in academic journalism education (Jaakkola and Uotila 2022). Accordingly, in Finland, most working journalists have a higher education degree, and more than half of the workforce hold a degree specifically in journalism (Väliverronen, Pöyhtäri, and Villi 2023).

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of the study are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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