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Podcasting the Truth: Challenging Journalistic Knowledge and Building Epistemic Authority in Independent YouTube Podcasts

Viljami Vaarala [ORCID]

Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki, Finland

Correspondence: Viljami Vaarala (viljami.vaarala@helsinki.fi)

Abstract

The legitimacy of journalism as a truth-teller has become contested during the era of digitalisation and newly emerging platforms. Recently, the epistemic authority of legacy journalism has been challenged by right-wing podcasting. This article explores metajournalistic discussions on the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution in six Finnish podcasts published independently outside legacy media on YouTube. This metajournalistic discourse of truth is identified through topic modelling in 229 podcast episodes, of which 119 are scrutinised using qualitative discourse analysis. The discursive articulations in the YouTube podcast episodes are assessed in the light of realist and antirealist philosophies as well as epistemic theories of journalistic truth structured by critical realist and pragmatist philosophies. The results show that the epistemic authority of legacy journalism is challenged through three interconnected themes through which legacy journalism is articulated as an antirealist practice and institution. By contrast, YouTube podcasting is framed as a platform for a balanced, authentic, and uncut talk that realises the epistemic ideals of journalism. The challenges to the epistemic authority of legacy journalism presented by the Finnish YouTube podcasts are also similar to those identified in previous research on right-wing podcasting and online counter-media. The findings point to the need for legacy journalists and podcasting practitioners to adopt more nuanced and context-bound understandings of journalistic knowledge and truth structured by critical realist and pragmatist philosophies.

Keywords

antirealism; critical realism; epistemology of journalism; journalism; legacy journalism; metajournalistic discourse; podcast; pragmatism; realism; truth; YouTube

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1. Introduction

The legitimacy of journalism as a truth-teller has become contested during the era of digitalisation and new emerging platforms (Carlson, 2018; Ekström & Westlund, 2019b). While claims about the veracity of news are certainly not a new phenomenon, debates over the epistemic authority of legacy journalism re-gained momentum in the late 2010s and early 2020s in the form of fake news and post-truth (Carlson, 2018; Farkas, 2023; Waisbord, 2018). Recently, in the context of the US, independent right-wing podcasting has contested the epistemic authority of journalism, with actors outside legacy media challenging the authority of traditional journalistic institutions and establishing their own authority by "hijacking" the ideals of journalism and adopting the role of truth-teller (Dowling et al., 2022; see also Johansson, 2021; Markman & Sawyer, 2014). The influence of such US-based podcasting has also been observed in the Nordic countries. For instance, Johansson (2021) notes that a popular Swedish YouTube podcast has not only attempted to establish its authority by imitating the visual aesthetics of *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast—one of the most popular podcasts globally (see Colbjørnsen, 2024)—but it has also built its authority using countercultural narratives where podcasting is defined in contrast to legacy media and journalism.

The rise of podcasting has also been observed in Finland, where young people (aged 18–34) report significantly higher levels of podcast consumption than others (Reunanen et al., 2024). Furthermore, while Finland exhibits the highest level of trust in news among all countries studied in the most recent Reuters Institute Digital News Report, younger audiences show lower levels of trust in news (Reunanen et al., 2024). Instead, many report receiving information about current affairs and society from independent podcast channels published outside legacy media on YouTube and Spotify (Nepa, 2023, 2024; Reunanen et al., 2024). However, while the influence of US podcasting has already been noted in Sweden, studies on independent podcasting in the Nordic countries remain scarce.

This article assesses the contests over journalistic knowledge and truth in Finnish independent YouTube podcasts. It focuses on identifying discourses through which the epistemic authority of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is degraded in order to establish epistemic authority for YouTube podcasting. Legacy media and journalism are perceived in the context of this article as established media companies both in the public and private sectors, such as newspapers and the Finnish Broadcasting Company (Yle). YouTube podcasting is understood as a form of conversational audiovisual podcasting using YouTube as a central platform for distributing content, although episodes are also published on other podcasting platforms (Johansson, 2021). The epistemic contests over journalistic knowledge and truth are approached from the perspective of metajournalistic discourse, according to which the meanings and boundaries of journalism are defined discursively in social action (Carlson, 2016). This study uses topic modelling and discourse analysis to identify and analyse these metajournalistic discussions. It contributes to the empirical study of both podcasting and the epistemology of journalism by showing how YouTube podcasts challenge the loosely defined concept of journalistic truth to create their own epistemic authority.

2. Theoretical Framework

Contemporary journalism is bound by an obligation to the truth, and it constructs its epistemic authority by adopting the role of truth-teller (Karlsson, 2011; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021). Nonetheless, the concept of truth in journalism is complex, and it has generally been theorised through other central epistemological

concepts, such as objectivity. Admittedly, the concept of objectivity offers fruitful and diverse ways to study the epistemology of journalism. It has been examined, for instance, through ethnographical inquiries into journalistic methods and practices (Tuchman, 1972), as both an ethical norm that guides journalists' professional self-perception (Skovsgaard et al., 2013) and a norm against which the quality of journalistic outputs can be evaluated (Mellado et al., 2018). Some scholars have argued, however, that the discussion on objectivity steers the discussion away from the more fundamental concept of truth (Hearns-Branaman, 2016; Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Indeed, if journalism has an obligation to the truth and builds its epistemic authority by adopting the role of truth-teller, it is necessary to assess both how journalism is granted its identity as a truth-oriented practice and institution and how this role is being re-negotiated and challenged by new emerging actors online.

2.1. A Post-Foundational Perspective on Metajournalistic Discourse

The challenges posed by the epistemic authority of legacy journalism are approached in this article through the theoretical lens of metajournalistic discourse. In metajournalistic discourse, the legitimacy and normative roles of journalism are increasingly defined and discussed outside professional and legacy journalism by various members of the public (Carlson, 2016, 2017). While the legitimacy of journalism as an institution is based on certain socially accepted ethical and normative ideals, such as objectivity and the pursuit of truth, these ideals are never static, and their meanings can be challenged and changed in social and discursive action (Carlson, 2016). Carlson (2016, p. 350) defines metajournalistic discourse as "the site in which actors publicly engage in processes of establishing definitions, setting boundaries, and rendering judgments about journalism's legitimacy." The theory of metajournalistic discourse, then, provides an understanding of journalism as a practice and institution that gains its meanings as a result of social action where the authority of journalism is constantly re-negotiated (Carlson, 2017).

In this article, the theory of metajournalistic discourse is coupled with a more refined theory on discourses rooted in post-foundationalism (Marttila, 2016). Generally speaking, discourse theories posit that social reality is constructed through language use and meaning-making that eventually lead to shared social meanings perceived as objective and natural by society at large (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this light, discourses structure individuals' thinking and behaviour. In contrast to some other discourse theories, post-foundational theory adopts a particular ontological stance in relation to discourses: Reality is constituted and made intelligible to humans only in social action through discourses (Marttila, 2016). That is, our access to reality is limited to the domain of discourses, whereas, according to the critical realist stance adopted by critical discourse analysis, for instance, a distinction is made between the discursively structured social reality and the extra-discursive ontological state of affairs (Marttila, 2016; see also Laclau & Bhaskar, 1998). Post-foundationalism admits, however, the likely existence of a human-independent reality, yet this reality can only be made intelligible through the meaning-making and language use encompassed by discourses (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). A post-foundational theory of discourses pays particular attention to the identity creation of individuals, groups, and objects via discourses (see Section 3), whereas other discourse theories focus on, for instance, particular situations of language use (e.g., discursive psychology) and changes of meaning over time (e.g., critical discourse analysis; Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this regard, a post-foundational theory of discourses offers a compatible theoretical and methodological framework to study the metajournalistic discourse of truth through which the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is established and negotiated.

2.2. Truth in Journalism

The identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is assessed in light of four central philosophical traditions that have guided the theories on journalistic truth in journalism studies. These philosophies are realism, antirealism, critical realism, and pragmatism (e.g., Hearns-Branaman, 2016; Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015).

Realism and antirealism differ from the critical realist and pragmatist traditions in their fundamental understandings of truth and the nature of reality. In the context of this article, realism is understood in terms of naïve realism and a naïve correspondence theory of truth, in which news content is expected to correspond to objective metaphysical reality and the ontological state of affairs as they are (Maras, 2013). Such conceptions of truth have been heavily criticised by journalism scholars (e.g., Muñoz-Torres, 2012). However, such naïve realist perceptions have historically structured the epistemic ideals of journalism, such as objectivity, which have been conveyed to journalism through the tradition of scientific realism (Maras, 2013; Waisbord, 2018). While news content must indeed have some correspondence to the events of the world to be considered "*true*, or at least an acceptable approximation of truth," journalistic knowledge and truth are always subordinate to various editorial processes, epistemological practices, and technologies (McNair, 2005, p. 30, emphasis in the original). Nevertheless, accusations of bias in professional journalism are commonly structured by naïve correspondence or naïve empiricism, where direct observation is considered the only form of valid knowledge (Maras, 2013).

Antirealism adopts an ontological position opposed to realism. Antirealism generally considers that the human perception of reality is always limited by sensory experiences and/or language use, and it is therefore impossible to achieve any truth about reality (Hearns-Branaman, 2016). Such a social constructivist perspective on reality and truth renders the concept of truth and knowledge vulnerable to relativism, according to which truth is always relative to a specific context (Hearns-Branaman, 2016). Adopting a fundamentally antirealist stance would shatter the normative role of journalism as a truth-teller, as there would be no shared understanding of valid knowledge and truth (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). Thus, antirealism is understood in this article as a relativist theory of truth, according to which journalism cannot deal with the truth or deliver truthful accounts of reality.

It should be noted, however, that there are also fruitful discussions on knowledge and truth within the realist and antirealist traditions (e.g., Gauthier, 2005; Lynch, 1998). Nonetheless, these philosophies are also burdened by their fundamental and extreme forms of naïve correspondence and relativism, which have also been observed to structure conceptions of knowledge and truth among professional journalists and members of the public (e.g., Hearns-Branaman, 2016; Lau, 2004; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Robertson, 2020). Contemporary journalism nonetheless requires a concept of journalistic truth that upholds its legitimacy:

> All of these truths—even the laws of science—are subject to revision, but we operate by them in the meantime because they are necessary and functionally work. This is what our journalism must be after—a practical or functional form of truth. It is not truth in the absolute or philosophical sense. It is not the truth of a chemical equation. Journalism can—and must—pursue truths by which we can operate on a day-to-day basis. (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2021, pp. 51–52)

Journalism scholars have therefore argued that both news professionals and the public should adopt conceptions of truth that are structured according to critical realist or pragmatist philosophies (Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015). According to these traditions, journalism should be perceived as a truth-oriented practice and institution despite the fact that journalistic knowledge and truth are subject to various epistemological practices, value judgments, and power relations that are not inherently objective (Lau, 2004; Maras, 2013; Muñoz-Torres, 2012).

Two central features of critical realist and pragmatist forms of journalistic truth are key for the purposes of this article. First, they both adopt a fallibilist position that allows for the correction of journalistic mistakes and for journalistic knowledge and truth to change from what has been previously reported (Elder-Vass, 2022; Ward, 2015). Second, they emphasise the social processes affecting the production of knowledge and truth rather than focusing on "the metaphysical quest of moving closer to reality" (Ward, 2015, p. 289; see also Ekström & Westlund, 2019a; Elder-Vass, 2022). While critical realism and pragmatism diverge in their ontological beliefs regarding the existence of human-independent metaphysical reality (Elder-Vass, 2022), from the perspective of journalism they function as philosophies that succeed in upholding the identity of journalism as a truth-oriented institution and help journalism confront naïve realist and relativist arguments (Maras, 2013; Ward, 2015). Critical realism and pragmatism are treated here as epistemic theories of journalistic truth that uphold the role of journalism as a truth-teller while simultaneously admitting that knowledge and truth are affected by various epistemological practices, value judgments, and power relations (e.g., Elder-Vass, 2022).

2.3. YouTube Podcasting: An Emerging Form of Contestation Over Journalistic Authority

The identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution has been questioned by new and emerging online actors. While a vibrant body of research on fake news and post-truth has appeared during the past decade, the empirical analysis of epistemic contests over journalism in the light of more fundamental epistemological and philosophical concepts has remained scarce. Nonetheless, some observations have been made in the context of Nordic far-right counter-media, where journalistic truth and knowledge are often perceived through (naïve) realist perspectives rooted in an "empiricist-positivist philosophy of science" (Ylä-Anttila, 2018, p. 369). For these claims, it is common to articulate legacy journalism as a biased and deceitful institution that delivers untruthful and emotion-based information, in contrast to far-right counter-media outlets, which frame themselves as offering a realist and factual alternative to legacy media (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019).

Contestations over journalistic truth have also recently been observed in the context of right-wing podcasting in the US, where the legitimacy of journalism has been questioned by independent podcasting practitioners (Dowling et al., 2022). In these epistemic challenges, the metajournalistic discourse of truth has played a prominent role since podcasts have constructed their epistemic authority by defining themselves as "trusted arbiter[s] of truth" in contrast to legacy media (Dowling et al., 2022, p. 5). Previous research on independent podcasts has also shown that they tend to define themselves as an alternative to mainstream media through this type of negative or antagonistic logic (Markman & Sawyer, 2014). Independent podcasting is, therefore, defined here loosely as a podcasting practice that is produced outside legacy media and is not directly affiliated with any legacy media outlet or broadcaster (Laughlin, 2023; Markman & Sawyer, 2014).

In this study, YouTube podcasts are approached as a form of visual podcasting that distributes content both in audiovisual and audio-only formats (Bonini, 2022; Johansson, 2021). While other podcasting platforms, such as Spotify, have introduced a video feature for podcasts, YouTube is still considered a central platform for these podcasts to distinguish themselves from legacy media (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Johansson, 2021). Furthermore, while audio is also the most important modality for YouTube podcasts (Johansson, 2021), visuality plays a central role in creating a sense of community, intimacy, and trust between podcast hosts and the audience through a feeling of liveness and immediacy (Euritt, 2023). The host–audience relationship is also reinforced through paratexts, such as background cues, logos, memes, and merchandise, that also offer monetising opportunities for these independent podcasts (Bonini, 2022; Euritt, 2023). Distributing podcasting content through YouTube is, therefore, perceived as signalling both intellectual and economic independence from legacy media and other "former monopolies of knowledge" (Johansson, 2021, p. 271).

Based on this literature review, the research questions are the following:

RQ1: Through what themes is the metajournalistic discourse of truth conducted in independent Finnish YouTube podcasts that actively discuss the veracity of legacy media and journalism?

RQ2: How are the epistemic challenges relating to legacy journalism's identity as a truth-oriented practice and institution structured by realist, antirealist, and epistemic theories of truth on Finnish YouTube podcasts?

RQ3: How is the epistemic authority of independent YouTube podcasting constructed through the metajournalistic discourse of truth?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Selection and Data Processing

Five criteria guided the selection of YouTube podcast channels for the analysis: that the podcast (a) commented on news and current affairs and engaged in metajournalistic discourse, (b) that it was produced independently outside legacy media (see Markman & Sawyer, 2014), (c) that it was published on YouTube and had at least 5,000 subscribers, (d) that the podcast hosts were not directly involved in party politics, and (e) that it did not actively discuss conspiracy theories. Following these criteria, six YouTube podcast channels were chosen for further analysis after the author actively followed the Finnish YouTube podcasting scene in 2022 (see Table 1). Following the typology created by Newman and Gallo (2019, 2020), the selected podcasts can be categorised as deep dive podcasts, extended chats, or mixtures of these two news podcast genres. All the selected podcasts were hosted by males, and the guests appearing on the shows were also predominantly male. It was also common for the podcast hosts to occasionally appear as guests in each other's podcasts. The duration of the podcast episodes ranged between 20 and 120 minutes, averaging one hour.

After identifying the relevant podcasts for the study, the author browsed all the available episodes on their YouTube channels and identified episodes involving metajournalistic discourse. This was achieved by identifying topics related to media and journalism by reading the titles and descriptions of the episodes and identifying the guests. Episodes with journalists or guests with journalistic backgrounds, for example, were

automatically included. After this process, the data consisted of 229 episodes published between 2018 and mid-April 2023, marking the end of Finnish parliamentary elections in which the budget of the national broadcaster was a prominent topic of debate. The audio files were extracted from YouTube in June 2023, after which a transcription service based on OpenAI's Whisper model was used to transcribe the audio files into text documents (https://openai.com/index/whisper).

Table 1. Description of the selected podcasts and the number of podcast episodes included in the data.

Name of the podcast, year of first published episode on YouTube, description of the podcast	Number of episodes/ text documents in the data after topic modelling	Number of subscribers in spring 2023 (approximate)
Futucast, 2018 An extended chat podcast between two hosts and guest(s). The podcast channel is described as offering "general knowledge" and covering "societal issues." The podcast offers commercial collaboration deals that may affect the content.	22	14,000
Puheenaihe (Topic), 2018 An extended chat podcast between two hosts and guest(s). According to the YouTube channel's description, the podcast addresses "the most interesting topics in Finland." The podcast offers commercial collaboration deals that may affect the content.	39	28,000
Ivan Puopolo, 2019 A podcast shifting between the deep dive and extended chat genres. The podcast host also hosts a morning TV show for a commercial legacy media outlet. There are often guest(s) in the podcast. The topics revolve around freedom of speech, politics, and media.	39*	39,000
#neuvottelija (#negotiator), 2020 A podcast drawing on both the deep dive and extended chat genres. The podcast is hosted by one person who initially discussed topics relating to negotiating skills, companies, and entrepreneurship with guests. Since then, topics have revolved increasingly around politics, the economy, and media.	5**	16,000
Otetaan yhdet! (Let's have a drink!), 2020 An extended chat podcast with two hosts that both have worked with legacy media. At the beginning of each episode, the hosts open (alcoholic) beverages and introduce the products of their commercial collaborators. The topics revolve around news, lifestyle, masculinity, and working out.	5**	6,000
23 minuuttia (23 minutes), 2020 A deep dive podcast channel that draws on the informal style of extended chat podcasts. The channel publishes five 23-minute episodes a week. The hosts have a background in legacy media, and they mainly discuss current events, politics, and media. There are sometimes guests on the show.	9	21,000

Notes: * Eight podcast episodes were removed after topic modelling with random selection to avoid the overrepresentation of certain podcast channels; ** podcast episodes were added with random selection because the number of episodes after topic modelling was <5.

In order to identify the episodes most likely to include metajournalistic discourse, the author relied on topic modelling. Latent Dirichlet allocation topic modelling is a probabilistic computational method used to analyse large data sets and detect patterned language use. It is considered an apt method for complementing discourse analytical approaches in which data sets are considered too small for general conclusions (Jacobs & Tschötschel, 2019). Topic modelling helped the author confirm whether metajournalistic discourse actually existed and the extent to which it was present in the episodes. Thus, topic modelling guided the selection of appropriate documents for close reading and discourse analysis (see Koljonen, 2023).

Topic modelling was conducted for models of 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 topics, from which the model of 20 topics (k20 model) was selected due to its detailedness and intelligibility after three iterations. While performing close readings of the text documents in between these iterations, the author noted that the k20 model produced more detailed topics relating to journalism and media than the k10 model and more intelligible topics than the k30 model. Before running the final iteration, the 6–30-page text documents were tokenised into excerpts of 700–1,000 words due to the author's observation in the qualitative data analysis software that the discussed themes in the episodes typically changed after that number of words (for improvement of topic models through multiple iterations see Jockers & Mimno, 2013; Lindgren, 2020). The k20 model produced eight topics relating to media, journalism, and epistemology, confirming that metajournalistic discourse was present in the data (see Supplementary File). The other 12 topics of the k20 model related to other themes that were not directly connected to media or journalism but were still intelligible to the author (e.g., discussions about the prime minister of Finland, prosecutions of politicians, foreign policy, and the opening and ending slots of the podcast episodes).

The final data set for qualitative discourse analysis was selected by choosing the top 50 tokens of each eight topics relating to media, journalism, and epistemology and connecting the tokens to the original text documents. Thus, the data set for qualitative discourse analysis consisted of 119 documents that most likely included metajournalistic discourse of truth through which meanings about legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution are established.

3.2. Discourse Analysis

The study used post-foundational discourse analysis to analyse the identity of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution. The analysis was guided by the theory of metajournalistic discourse, according to which meanings about journalism are established in relation to specific themes (Carlson, 2016). Discourse analysis for the 119 transcribed documents was conducted using Atlas.TI, and it consisted of four phases (see Figure 1). The quality of the transcription was also verified by simultaneously playing the audio files in the background when locating metajournalistic discourse through keywords and identifying themes.

According to post-foundational discourse theory, the themes of metajournalistic discourse can be perceived as nodal points of discourse. Nodal points structure and tie together various discursively articulated elements that, as a whole, grant meaning and identity to a discourse (Marttila, 2016). It is also through discursive articulations that the meaning and identity of the discourse are either maintained or changed (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). For example, when legacy journalism is discussed through the theme of freedom of speech, journalism is assigned a discursively structured identity and role of enforcing freedom of speech in society. Thus, the theme/nodal point "freedom of speech" can be connected discursively to the
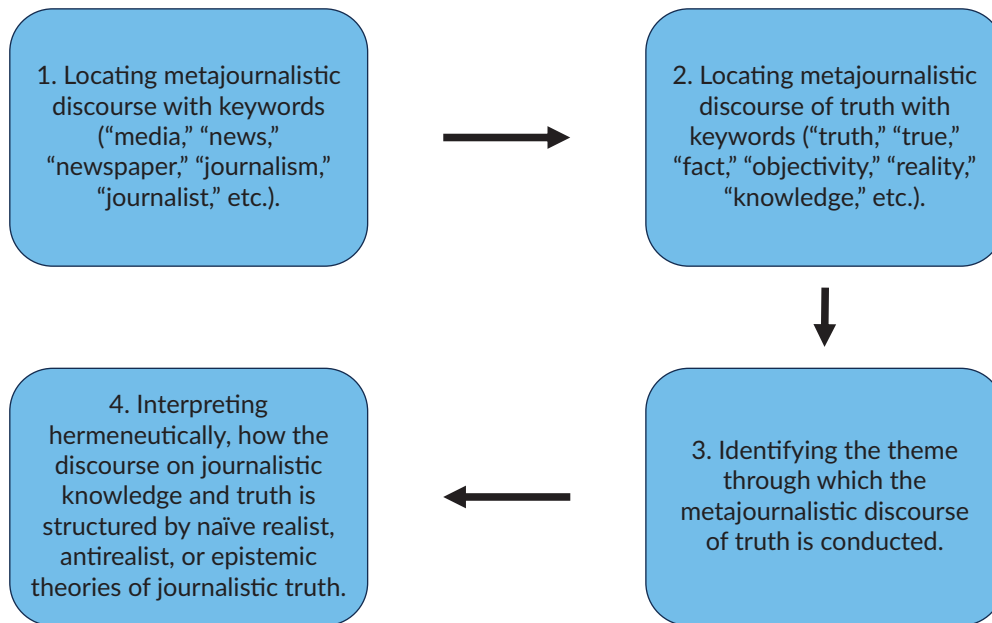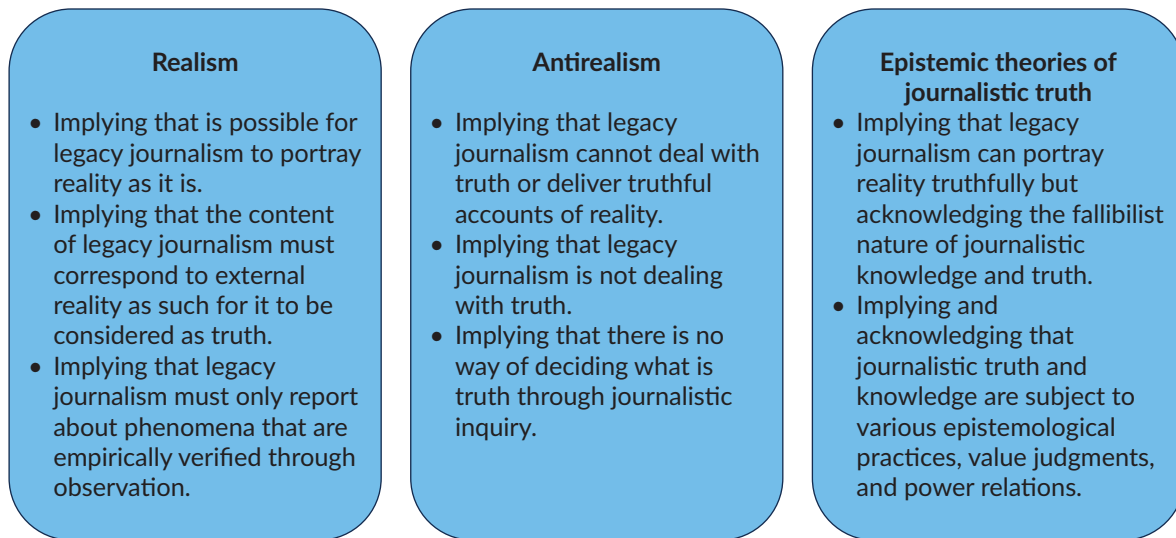
Figure 1. A detailed description of the discourse-analytical process.

role of journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution, for example, by claiming that journalism should communicate all views and opinions that exist in society as they are without censorship or bias. In such a claim, the identity of journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is interpreted to be structured by naïve realism and naïve correspondence (see Ylä-Anttila, 2018). On the other hand, some could argue that the normative role of journalism should aim to offer a platform for various views in society to enforce freedom of speech while also acknowledging that journalism cannot liberate itself completely from interpretation, value judgements, or various forms of structural power (such a conception is interpreted here to be structured by epistemic theories of truth; see Hearns-Branaman, 2016). It is noteworthy that discourse analytical approaches cannot rely on the systematic analysis of formal structures alone (e.g., the identification of nodal points) but also require a hermeneutical approach that is sensitive to the different contexts where discourses are established and used (van Dijk, 2011). Thus, journalistic knowledge and truth are discussed in various contexts throughout the data, and their link to the various philosophical traditions requires interpretation (see Figure 2).

4. Results

The metajournalistic discourse of truth in independent Finnish YouTube podcasts is reactive in nature. That is, the themes through which metajournalistic discourse is performed originate mainly from a commentary on emerging events covered by legacy media (Carlson, 2016). However, these reactive themes broaden metajournalistic discourse into more general and generative discussions about the normative epistemic role of legacy journalism. The author identified three interconnected generative themes when performing a close reading and conducting discourse analysis for the text documents. While other themes were identified in the data (such as Russian and Ukrainian war propaganda in the Finnish media, the relationship between legacy media and the then-Finnish prime minister, and the Covid-19 pandemic) the three generative themes were interpreted as wider thematic frameworks encompassing the essence of the other themes. This section elaborates on the discursive processes through which meanings about the identity of legacy journalism as a

Realism	Antirealism	Epistemic theories of journalistic truth
• Implying that is possible for legacy journalism to portray reality as it is. • Implying that the content of legacy journalism must correspond to external reality as such for it to be considered as truth. • Implying that legacy journalism must only report about phenomena that are empirically verified through observation.	• Implying that legacy journalism cannot deal with truth or deliver truthful accounts of reality. • Implying that legacy journalism is not dealing with truth. • Implying that there is no way of deciding what is truth through journalistic inquiry.	• Implying that legacy journalism can portray reality truthfully but acknowledging the fallibilist nature of journalistic knowledge and truth. • Implying and acknowledging that journalistic truth and knowledge are subject to various epistemological practices, value judgments, and power relations.

Figure 2. Central criteria guiding the interpretation of articulations relating to journalistic knowledge and truth.

truth-oriented practice and institution are created and how these YouTube podcasts build their own epistemic authority through this metajournalistic critique.

4.1. Articulating Legacy Journalism as an Antirealist Practice and Institution

The epistemic authority of journalism is undermined by articulating legacy journalists and media as ideologically biased. This overarching theme of "ideologically driven and biased legacy journalists" forms the baseline for the metajournalistic discourse of truth that is also present when other themes/nodal points are introduced. In this critical discourse, it is claimed that legacy media and journalists have liberal biases and systematically disregard conservative views. Such claims are present in both direct accusations and also the premises embedded in the critical questions posed to guests, as in the following excerpt from *Futucast*: "How much were you controlled in the background [when you were scripting the satirical newscast]? You are nonetheless working for a mainstream media company, so you cannot say whatever you want." Such remarks imply that journalists working for legacy media cannot portray things realistically due to restrictive (ideological or economic) structures that inhibit journalists from delivering truthful accounts of reality. While this could be interpreted as a promising step towards fruitful discussions about the limitations of journalistic inquiry and journalistic knowledge, these claims are often used to impose an antirealist identity on legacy journalism:

> If you have 100 researchers out of which 98 are left-wing liberals, and even though you apply whatever criteria, you will probably pick a left-wing liberal [expert for an interview]….Let's suppose that you wanted to steer reality towards right-wing conservatism and wanted to pick experts for this purpose, you would not find them….And for some reason, for example, this gender question is a good one because everyone has an opinion on it and it is after all a question about definitions, whether something is defined as gender or not. So, for some reason biologists are not saying anything. No one asks them how this goes. (*Ivan Puopolo*'s host)

The excerpt above shows a general pattern in which the discussions about journalism and journalistic epistemology develop in some 10 minutes into wider discussions about science and society. While the

object of discussion has shifted, in this case to biology, meanings about journalism are still being created. Some of the critique could also be viewed as being structured by more elaborate epistemic theories of journalistic truth since the critique is aimed at deficiencies in the epistemological practices of journalism regarding balance (e.g., interviewing the same or similarly minded experts, and not offering sufficiently balanced perspectives within individual news stories; for the pragmatist ideal of balance in journalism see Hearns-Branaman, 2016). However, the alleged like-mindedness and consensus among experts are often perceived as the intentional bias of legacy media towards picking the same experts for interviews rather than, for instance, a particular feature of Nordic political and media culture (e.g., Andersson, 2023; Rainio-Niemi, 2015).

This critique of the ideology and bias of legacy media and like-minded experts is also prominent in the second interconnected theme, which is interpreted and labelled as "gender issues and science." At this discursive nodal point, legacy journalism is articulated as an institution burdened by universities' humanist and social sciences that educate journalists about "gender" and "woke" ideologies—that is, political activism focusing on gender and minority issues that represents the thinking of only a small minority. The relationship between legacy journalists and experts is perceived here as a vicious circle: Experts educate legacy journalists, and journalists adopt the views and ideology of these experts and foster them in their news stories:

> One concrete [example] is probably unanimity in the Finnish media. And I refer [in my book] to research conducted at Tampere University about the political views of university students. And over half of journalism students vote for The Greens and one-third vote for the Left Alliance. And even though young people tend to support The Greens and many journalism students probably convert, like myself, when they become adults and start to vote for adults' parties, I would nonetheless say that in a big Finnish media company, like *Helsingin Sanomat* [the biggest newspaper] and Yle [the national broadcaster]...and maybe also *Suomen Kuvalehti* [a news magazine], there is a quite strong red-green bias....And there is similar red-green dominance at the universities, and that is where I picked my own green thinking when I was working as a researcher after graduation. And it is like a factory setting when one pursues a career as a researcher in the social sciences and humanities and to some extent in legal science, where I was. (*Puheenaihe*'s guest)

One prominent and overarching topic of discussion within this framework is gender. As seen in the very first quote of Section 4.1, gender is often articulated as a non-ideological and ontological biological fact, whereas journalistic articles about pluralist views on gender are interpreted as a form of activism and an attempt to inject journalists' own ideology into society. The discussion also becomes easily confused since the Finnish language contains just one word to describe both the socially constructed roles of females and males (gender) and the physical and biological characteristics of females and males (sex). The discussion on gender is often linked to discussions about the role of objectivity and facts in journalism. Objectivity is, however, often structured according to naïve realist perspectives based on the assumed existence of "objective facts" without elaborating on the precise meaning of objectivity:

> Should talk shows be based on objective facts and what would that mean?....Could Yle outline that its talk shows must be based on objective facts? Could Yle then broadcast any religious content? (*Puheenaihe*'s host)

> I have received multiple messages from a mainstream journalist during the past year relating to a matter I have been writing about, but they [sic] responded [to my writing] on their own initiative and stated that either "we do not even try to offer strictly fact-based journalism" or "we do not try to achieve any objectivity. Our aim is to offer the readers a nice experience or to tell a nice story." But, from a scientist's perspective, this made my hackles rise a little bit. (*Ivan Puopolo*'s guest)

In the latter quote, scientific objectivity is juxtaposed with journalistic objectivity without contextualisation. There exists an underlying assumption that some branches of science are more objective than others, and legacy journalism is perceived to be dealing excessively with phenomena that are difficult to verify scientifically, in contrast to hard and objective sciences. Here, mathematics and most of the natural sciences are articulated as realist and ideology-free practices that can show people how the world really is:

> But the truth is so difficult [when it comes to fake news]. Like, I think that facts do not exist in a way, and this might require a bit of explaining. Facts only exist in mathematics and, in principle, no other facts exist. I could say that Helsinki is the capital of Finland, and it's a fact. But it is a fact that could change into something else. So, it will not always be that way. (*Puheenaihe*'s guest)

All this assigns journalism an extremely narrow role as a truth-oriented practice and institution as it sets rather strict limits on what journalism should report about. Considering political news, for instance, it is hard to imagine that journalists could produce relevant journalistic knowledge about politics and society without picking a perspective from which to write the story. Obviously, the perspectives in the subsequent stories should cover the previously ignored standpoints to realise the epistemic ideal of balance in the best way possible. Nevertheless, articulating journalistic knowledge and epistemology through such uncontextualised articulations of objectivity assigns journalism a role that it cannot fulfil. Journalism cannot operate solely on the basis of mathematical or hard objective facts, although they can help journalism perform better (e.g., Nguyen & Lugo-Ocando, 2016). Furthermore, the kind of parallels between journalistic and scientific objectivity implied by the guest scientist in the *Ivan Puopolo* podcast render the critique unreasonable and uncontextualised. Journalistic objectivity and scientific objectivity are two separate epistemological concepts, and they should be theorised and discussed respectively within their own separate fields (Semir, 2000).

Furthermore, journalistic objectivity is rarely defined or discussed in detail. This is problematic for two reasons. First, European ethical guidelines for journalists have defined the concept of objectivity in at least seven different ways (e.g., as a feature of reality, of a journalist, of a journalistic institution, of journalistic methods, etc.; Lehtinen, 2016). This illustrates the ambiguity of the concept of objectivity that also facilitates meaning-making structured by naïve realist conceptions that are still associated with journalistic practice (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). This leads to the second point: Such naïve realist perceptions of objectivity are self-contradictory since they normatively state that journalism should be based on objective facts but simultaneously present a value judgment in stating such a claim (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). In other words, value judgments and interpretations are still required to decide what these objective facts are.

The third central theme of the metajournalistic discourse of truth is called "freedom of speech." Here, it is often argued that the perspectives and themes covered in legacy media should reflect the views and thinking of the majority of the population. Thus, the epistemic role of legacy journalism is not to offer new perspectives on society and the world but rather to bring people together through common narratives:

So, I am now thinking about the diversity of opinions from the perspective of legacy media. So, if we have people there with certain opinions, these opinions should be present in the media in approximately the same proportion as they occur among the people. If we think about—I've always been using this as an example—gender diversity. I would say, according to my gut feeling...that 90% of the population say that there are male and female sexes, and that's it. Like biological sexes and that's it. But if we look at how much this opinion is present in public speech, it is way less than 90%. It is actually in the minority in public speech. And then again, we see that the diversity of opinion is not realised to the extent that it is present out there. And in this way, freedom of speech is not realised, or what I'd like to refer to as the diversity of opinions. (*Puheenaihe*'s guest)

As can be seen from the quote above, this metajournalistic theme is yet again used to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity as it fails to portray the social reality as it is. This finding also intersects with narratives that are common in the right-wing counter-media, in which the authentic truth can thrive only when journalism applies absolute freedom of speech and anything can be said without limitations or bias (Ylä-Anttila, 2018). There is a realist connotation embedded in an argument for such an absolute form of freedom of speech since it assumes that representing the thinking of the majority reveals some truth about social reality whereas the thinking of the minority fails to do so. In such a view, the existing biases within the majority are not acknowledged.

Some discussions on journalistic knowledge and truth on the podcasts are also structured according to epistemic theories of journalistic truth. However, they are often articulated by legacy journalists appearing as guests in the episodes. Epistemic theories of journalistic truth are manifested mainly in the form of fallibilism, in which legacy journalists attempt to advance a view of journalistic knowledge and truth as self-correcting processes, such as in the following excerpts by legacy journalists visiting the podcasts:

So, we talked about those objective facts. Obviously, all the discussion in the media cannot be based on them. But if someone clearly makes erroneous claims or begins spreading conspiracy theories [like on *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast] and if the media serves a journalistic function, then one must confront these claims and question them, but Joe Rogan and Spotify aren't journalistic institutions. (*Puheenaihe*'s guest)

Journalism is made by humans, and there are obviously mistakes. But if the media is committed to self-regulation through the Council for Mass Media, then they will correct those errors. (*Futucast*'s guest)

These excerpts show that journalistic knowledge is defined mainly in relation to "errors" or "erroneous claims," without elaborating further on how journalistic knowledge is constructed. In such definitions, there is a risk that journalistic knowledge and truth will be defined in relation to falseness, rendering journalistic knowledge and truth subject to interpretations structured by naïve realism (i.e., in contrast to falseness and error, there is a single truth to be reported). Such a dialectical view of journalistic knowledge and truth has also been observed among legacy journalists. In this view, the pragmatist ideals of journalism are articulated as important, such as balancing news stories with different views, but the truthfulness of the content is defended through naïve realist arguments in a philosophically incompatible way (Hearns-Branaman, 2016). This finding emphasises the need for legacy journalists to adopt and endorse an epistemic view in which the presence of both errors,

inevitable biases, and the fallibility of truthful journalistic outputs is openly admitted. Simultaneously, actors outside legacy journalism, such as members of the audience and podcasters, should be introduced to more nuanced and context-bound understandings of journalistic knowledge and truth in order to confront naïve realist conceptions.

4.2. Constructing the Epistemic Authority for YouTube Podcasting Through Claims of Authenticity

Legacy media forms an integral part of the independent YouTube podcasts by helping them to define their position in the Finnish media landscape. As knowledge production in the mainstream media is characterised by certain ideological and political biases, which are discussed through the aforementioned themes, independent YouTube podcasting is articulated as a balancing media practice. The YouTube podcasts also demarcate themselves from legacy media by recurrently referring to a wider community of visual podcasting, such as the US-based *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast, and the conservative legacy media outlet Fox News. *The Joe Rogan Experience* podcast and Fox News are articulated as the embodiments of a truly liberal media system that allows all voices to be heard. It is here that the epistemic authority of the YouTube podcasts is strongly linked to the metajournalistic theme of "freedom of speech," through which the podcasts justify their position in the media landscape by offering a platform for conservative and other disregarded views in Finnish society:

> There exists a class that has found cohesion [in identity political matters in the US] in the past 10 years and that can be also seen in Finland where big media companies and big tech are both representative of the mindset where showing dissent practically means that you are an idiot and a right-wing extremist who should be cancelled. And that's why this podcast show exists because the oxygen that is important for public discussion has been running low during the past five years. (*23 minuuttia*'s host)

Thus, YouTube podcasting both corrects the ideological and political biases in the media landscape and lays the foundation for direct and uncut discussion in which guests and hosts can authentically express themselves. This authenticity is also assigned a realist connotation by claiming that through in-depth, direct discussions, it is possible to discern (objective) truths from untruths:

> The strength of podcasting generally, not just in our [*Futucast*] podcast but probably in your [*Puheenaihe* podcast] as well…is that here we really get to discuss….And of course, you also have different kinds of responsibilities [for spreading controversial claims] when you have a podcast or a media platform….But on an ideal level, I am such a freedom-of-speech fetishist myself that I am willing to sit down and find out and bring into the light the truths and untruths in all claims. (*Futucast*'s host)

These Finnish YouTube podcasts are then establishing their identity through the metajournalistic discourse of truth by self-identifying with an ideal liberal US media system where, allegedly, all views are authentically represented in the media. What this liberal ideal means in practice for these Finnish YouTube podcasts, however, is a bias in favour of right-wing political views. In 70 out of the 229 podcast episodes chosen for this study, there were guests with a background in right-wing parties, compared to 9 episodes featuring guests from left-wing parties. Therefore, these Finnish independent YouTube podcasts seem to be following the global trend in which right-wing political views continue to be dominant in YouTube podcasting (Dowling et al., 2022; Johansson, 2021).

5. Conclusion

This article assessed the metajournalistic discourse of truth occurring in Finnish independent YouTube podcasts. The results show that the discourse on the epistemic authority of legacy journalism as a truth-oriented practice and institution is structured according to three central themes: ideologically driven and biased journalists, gender issues and science, and freedom of speech (RQ1). The articulations within these themes are exposed to naïve realist interpretations of journalistic knowledge and truth that appear to highlight the inability of legacy media to realise the ideal of delivering truthful accounts of reality. While the YouTube podcasts indeed address important questions about epistemological deficiencies within professional journalism (e.g., acquiring balance in news stories) and point to the need for professional journalism to refine its epistemological concepts (e.g., the ambiguity of the concept of objectivity), the discussion tends to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity (RQ2). Furthermore, even though some legacy journalists visiting the podcasts attempt to engage in the discussion about journalism's epistemological practices and journalistic knowledge, they often fail to argue for a concept of truth supported and structured according to epistemic theories of truth. This highlights the continuing difficulties within professional journalism in engaging with complex epistemological discussions and endorsing a perception of journalistic truth where, while the fallibility of journalistic knowledge is admitted, such knowledge could still be regarded as truthful (e.g., Muñoz-Torres, 2012).

Podcasting, on the other hand, is articulated as a practice that introduces balance to the media landscape by diversifying the public discussion. Along with this ideal of balance derived from epistemic theories of journalistic truth, podcasting is also seen to achieve the realist ideals of journalism through the authenticity of the format, where speech is direct and uncut. The epistemic authority of podcasting is thus structured through metajournalistic discourse of truth by appropriating elements from both realist and epistemic theories of truth (RQ3). These claims for authority should be approached, however, with a critical lens, since the epistemological challenges of journalism highlighted by the podcasts inevitably apply to podcasting as well. It is therefore problematic that YouTube podcasts establish their epistemic authority in contrast to legacy media through metajournalistic discourse of truth when their own practices are prone to similar epistemic contests and critique.

These findings are in line with previous research on podcasting and online counter-media. US podcasts like *The Joe Rogan Experience* are regularly mentioned as a source of inspiration for the Finnish YouTube podcasts investigated here, and they seem to display a similar tendency to offer a platform for political views present only on the margins of legacy media (Colbjørnsen, 2024). Accusations of liberal and left-wing bias among legacy media are also used to emphasise the need for right-wing partisan media in Finland. This is indicative of the emergence of a right-wing sphere in Finnish podcasting that has also been observed, for instance, in the US and Sweden (Colbjørnsen, 2024; Dowling et al., 2022; Johansson, 2021; Laughlin, 2023). Furthermore, the results of this article suggest that the epistemic authority of the podcasts is built through poorly contextualised discussions about journalism's epistemology that degrade the epistemic authority of legacy journalism. The results are also aligned with studies relating to online counter-media indicating that the metajournalistic discourse of truth in the podcasts concerned seems to have existed prior to the publication of the first episodes. While these studies do not apply the concept of metajournalistic discourse of truth as such, their results point to similar articulations structured by naïve realism that threaten to assign legacy journalism an antirealist identity (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019; Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

As podcasting is emerging as a platform for regular metajournalistic discussions and journalists are invited to these podcasts to elaborate on their work, it is important that legacy journalists are equipped with the understanding of journalistic knowledge and truth that are defendable against these epistemic challenges. Therefore, the article invites legacy media institutions, individual journalists, and independent podcasting practitioners to contemplate their relationship to the concept of truth. Moreover, as new independent podcasts drawing on journalistic ethics have already appeared, the article recommends that future research focus on how journalistic epistemological practices and ethical codes are applied in podcast content, both inside and outside legacy media.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Author

Viljami Vaarala is a doctoral researcher pursuing a PhD at the Swedish School of Social Science at the University of Helsinki, Finland. His dissertation explores the epistemic contests over the concept of journalistic truth and investigates the epistemological beliefs among professional journalists. Ultimately, the dissertation will assess how ambiguities relating to the concept of truth are used online to degrade the epistemic authority of journalism. Viljami's general interest revolves around political debates about the meanings of journalism and the epistemology of journalism.