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Avoiding a race to the bottom?

A critical examination of pioneer journalists' futures knowledge and journalistic practices

Juho Ruotsalainen

TURUN YLIOPISTON JULKAISUJA – ANNALES UNIVERSITATIS TURKUENSIS
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the futures knowledge, journalistic norms and professional practices of so-called pioneer journalists. These journalists, who include news startup founders or other entrepreneurial journalists, are often perceived as vanguards of journalism's futures whose models can eventually be adopted in the wider journalistic field. Rather than providing foresight into journalism's possible futures, this study critically examined how these actors envision journalism's futures and translate these visions into new journalistic practices. The futures knowledge they produce in doing so is conceptualised as socially constructed and shaped by expectations grounded in the present media landscape as well as the broader social imaginaries of digital culture.

The empirical data were collected from 2015–2019 from semi-structured interviews with Finnish entrepreneurial journalists, the 'About Us' pages of European and American news startups, the yearly predictions by pioneer journalists and journalism experts as collected by the Nieman Lab of Harvard University, textual practices in entrepreneurial journalists' daily news and the on-stage, live journalism manuscripts of pioneering intrapreneurs at the Finnish legacy newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*.

The journalists who were examined in this study envisioned journalism that is oriented towards users and their interests. Enacting these user-centric expectations, they privileged audience-funded, specialised, interpretive, participatory and non-algorithmic approaches to news. They expected these approaches to provide solutions to the challenges facing journalism in contemporary algorithmic digital media environments: the erosion of journalisms' business models, the oversupply and declining quality of news, waning audience interest, attention, and trust, and limited diversity in news coverage.

Normatively, these practices drew on and were legitimised by three imaginaries: dialogic journalism, peer-to-peer and the Californian Ideology. Each of these imaginaries valorises journalism that is produced through audience-journalist collaborations. However, the individualist undertones of the peer-to-peer imaginary and the Californian Ideology diverge from foundational journalistic norms. They emphasise journalism that caters to users' specialised interests, is organised through decentralised networks, and is sustained by communities of shared interest. Despite

their emancipatory and inclusive promises, these two technological imaginaries may reinforce the influence of already privileged information elites and reproduce existing inequalities in news access and participation. The study, therefore, conceptualises such participatory news models as ‘used futures’ that circulate idealised notions of digital media without fully addressing the tensions they create in relation to journalistic norms.

The study contributes to research on journalism’s ongoing transformations, to the methodology of pioneer analysis and to the broader integration of futures studies with sociological approaches. Within futures studies, it advocates an approach in which futures are more carefully grounded in the present socio-material conditions rather than projected into temporal spaces emptied of the complexities of actualised, lived futures. It concludes that journalism’s future trajectories cannot be reduced to pragmatist-realist foresight but must also be understood as contested, socially and materially embedded processes in which ideals, practices and expectations intersect with structural constraints and affordances.

KEYWORDS: Californian Ideology, critical futures studies, dialogic journalism, futures of journalism, peer-to-peer, pioneer journalism, social imaginary, sociology of expectations

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Väitöstutkimus tarkastelee niin kutsuttujen edelläkävijätoimittajien (*pioneer journalists*) tulevaisuustietoa, journalistisia normeja ja ammatillisia käytäntöjä. Edelläkävijöillä viitataan tutkimuksessa toimittajiin, jotka uudistavat journalismia hyödyntämällä digitalisaation avaamia mahdollisuuksia tai vastaamalla sen tuomiin haasteisiin. Edelläkävijätoimittajien kokeilut ja toimintamallit leviävät usein ajan saatossa myös perinteisen uutismedian käyttöön. Näin edelläkävijätoimittajat vaikuttavat osaltaan siihen, millaiseksi ammatillisen uutisjournalismin tulevaisuus heitä laajemmin muovautuu.

Edelläkävijätoimittajien käytäntöjä ohjaavat yhtäältä heidän käsityksensä ja kuvitelmansa journalismin tulevaisuudesta—eli heidän tulevaisuustietonsa—sekä toisaalta journalismia määrittävät ammatilliset normit ja ihanteet. Journalismin tulevaisuuden ennakoinnin sijaan tutkimus keskittyy näiden käytäntöjä ohjaavien käsitysten kriittiseen analyysiin. Analyysin kohteena olevan tiedon nähdään rakentuvan suhteessa journalismin vaihtoehtoisia kehityskulkuja jäsentäviin odotuksiin (*expectations*) ja digitaalisen median sosiaalisiin imaginääreihin (*social imaginaries*).

Tutkimuksen aineisto kerättiin vuosina 2015–2019. Se koostuu suomalaisten journalismin startup-yrittäjien puolistrukturoiduista teemahaastatteluista, eurooppalaisten ja amerikkalaisten verkkouutismedioiden päivittäisuutisista ja toimituksellisia näkemyksiä kuvaavista "About Us" -sivuista, Harvardin yliopiston Nieman Labin vuosittaisista journalismiennusteista, sekä Helsingin Sanomien Musta laatikko -livejournalismiesitysten käsikirjoituksista. Aineisto analysoitiin laadullisesti, hyödyntäen muun muassa diskurssianalyysiä ja induktiivista temaattista luokittelua.

Tutkitut toimittajat asettivat päämääräkseen eri osayleisöjä ja heidän tarpeitaan yhä paremmin palvelevan uutistuotannon. He toteuttivat tätä odotusta tuottamalla erikoistunutta, yleisöjä osallistavaa ja tilaus- tai jäsenyystuloin rahoitettua journalismia. Käyttäjädataan perustuvan yleisöymmärryksen sijaan he korostivat yleisöjen ja toimittajien suoran vuorovaikutuksen tärkeyttä. Heidän uutissisältönsä olivat tyyliltään affektiivisia, tulkitsevia ja epämuodollisia. Tutkitut toimittajat katsoivat journalistisen mallinsa vastaavan niin perinteisen journalismin puutteisiin kuin digitaalisen mediaympäristön, sosiaalisen median ja suosittelualgoritmien korostamiin haasteisiin: journalismin mainosrahotteisten liiketoimintamallien murenemi-

seen, uutisten ylitarjontaan, journalistisen laadun heikkenemiseen, journalismin vähäiseen diversiteettiin, sekä yleisöjen laskevaan luottamukseen ja kiinnostukseen.

Tulosten analyysissä ja tulkinnassa käytännöt ja toimintamallit jäljitettiin kolmeen niille merkitystä antavaan ja legitimoivaan sosiaalisen imaginaariin: dialogiseen journalismiin (*dialogic journalism*), vertaistuotantoon (*peer-to-peer*) ja Piilaakson teknologiakehittäjien 'kalifornialaiseen ideologiaan' (*Californian Ideology*). Imaginaareja yhdistää ihanne journalismista, jota tuotetaan käyttäjä-yleisöjen ja toimittajien yhteistyössä. Näissä imaginaareissa perinteisen uutismedian keskeisiksi ongelmiksi nähdään näkökulmien ja äänien alhainen diversiteetti, etäisyys kansalaisten autenttisista intresseistä sekä yleisöjen passiivinen, vastaanottava rooli uutisten tuotannossa. Vertaistuotannon ja 'kalifornialaisen ideologian' imaginaarit eroavat dialogisen journalismin normeista ja ihanteista kuitenkin siinä, että ne korostavat hajautuneiden, intressiperustaisten verkostojen ja yhteisöjen roolia journalismin tuotannossa. Korostaessaan yleisöryhmien jaettuja intressejä ja aktiivista osallistumista, nämä imaginaarit ja niihin liittyvät käytännöt voivat yleistyessään ohjata journalismia palvelemaan entistä vahvemmin aktiivisia ja osallistuvia informaatioeliittejä. Emansipatorisista ja inklusiivisista lupauksistaan huolimatta ne voivat siis päinvastoin vahvistaa uutisten seurannan sosiaalista eriarvoisuutta. Tutkittujen toimittajien journalistista mallia ja sitä ohjaavia normeja, ihanteita ja tulevaisuusodotuksia kutsutaankin tutkimuksessa 'käytetyksi tulevaisuudeksi' (*used future*): ne tuovat journalismin kentälle jo vuosikymmeniä kritisoituja teknologis-normatiivisia malleja ilman niiden kriittistä tarkastelua suhteessa journalismin ammatillisiin normeihin.

Tutkimus kontribuoi journalismin digitaalisen murroksen tutkimukseen, edelläkävijäanalyysin metodologiaan sekä tulevaisuudentutkimuksen ja sosiologisten lähestymistapojen integraatioon. Tulevaisuudentutkimuksen kentällä se edistää lähestymistapaa, jossa ennakoidut tulevaisuudet ankkuroidaan olemassa oleviin sosio-materiaalisiin olosuhteisiin sen sijaan, että ne projisoitaisiin reaalisten olosuhteiden ja toteutuneiden tulevaisuuksien kompleksisuudesta ja moninaisuudesta 'tyhjennettyihin' ajallisiin tiloihin. Tutkimuksen keskeinen johtopäätös onkin, ettei journalismin tulevaisuutta voida pelkistää päätöksentekoa palveleviin yksinkertaistettuihin tulevaisuuskuviin, vaan ne on ymmärrettävä kiistanalaisina, sosiaalisesti ja materiaalisesti kietoutuneina prosesseina, joissa ihanteet, käytännöt ja odotukset risteävät rakenteellisten rajoitteiden ja mahdollisuuksien kanssa.

ASIASANAT: Dialoginen journalismi, edelläkävijätoimittajat, journalismin tulevaisuus, kalifornialainen ideologia, kriittinen tulevaisuudentutkimus, odotusten sosiologia, sosiaalinen imaginaari, vertaistuotanto

Acknowledgements

The origins of this work date back to 2015, before my PhD studies, when I began working on a project on digital-native journalism at the Finland Futures Research Centre. As 'digital-native' suggests, the project concerned journalism that is not just published *on* the web but that is born *of* the web—exclusively online journalism that reflects the values, norms, and practices of digital media. While expectations of the transformative, emancipatory and progressive potentials of the Internet remained influential, that period also marked the beginning of a shift in how digital media were perceived. Around that time, the exuberant optimism surrounding bloggers, citizen journalists, digitally organised grassroots movements and democratic uprisings, and the seemingly benign and progressive 'Web 2.0' companies began to wane. It became increasingly evident that digital media do not impose their inherent values on society; rather, they are deeply intertwined with, and shaped by, social, economic, and political forces. At least as much as the Internet emancipated individual users and enabled the spread of alternative but factual information, it was increasingly used to spread mis- and disinformation and to manipulate user behaviour through algorithmic practices.

This emerging media environment called for a methodological approach that focused on digital forerunners while situating them within complex relationships with other actors in the digital-media landscape as well as with broader societal forces. This provided the impetus for a doctoral dissertation that draws on theories and concepts from futures studies, journalism studies and sociology to make sense of the complex directions in which journalism appears to be developing.

An important milestone was the biennial Future of Journalism conference at Cardiff University in 2017, where I heard Professors Andreas Hepp and Wiebke Loosen present their research on pioneer journalists and communities. I warmly thank Professor Hepp for serving as one of the pre-examiners of my dissertation and for agreeing to act as the opponent at the public defence.

Another pivotal influence was reading the work of Dr Chris Groves on the politics of anticipation and the socio-material embeddedness of futures projections. I thank Dr Groves for his careful and insightful pre-examination of my work. Incorporating the sociology of expectations into the theoretical framework, as he

suggested, made the work much more analytically robust than it would otherwise have been.

Within futures studies, a foundational anchor was the pioneer analysis method developed by Professor Emerita Sirkka Heinonen, who was not only my supervisor but also a long-time mentor in the futures field. I am grateful to Sirkka for her patient guidance and warm presence throughout the years. In 15 years of working with her, I have never seen Sirkka lose her temper or composure, even in the most stressful situations!

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17.10.2025
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List of Original Publications

This dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Ruotsalainen, Juho, Heinonen, Sirkka, Hujanen, Jaana & Villi, Mikko. Pioneers as peers: How entrepreneurial journalists imagine the futures of journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 2021; 11(6): 1045–1064. https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996252

II Ruotsalainen, Juho & Villi, Mikko. Hybrid engagement: Discourses and scenarios of entrepreneurial journalism. *Media and Communication*, 2018; 6(4): 79–90. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1465

III Ruotsalainen, Juho. Scanning the shape of journalism—Emerging trends, changing culture? *Futures*, 2018; 104: 14–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.06.011

IV Ruotsalainen, Juho, Hujanen, Jaana & Villi, Mikko. A future of journalism beyond the objectivity-dialogue divide? Hybridity in the news of entrepreneurial journalists. *Journalism*, 2019; 22(9): 2240–2258. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919867216

V Ruotsalainen, Juho & Villi, Mikko. 'A shared reality between a journalist and the audience': How live journalism reimagines news stories. *Media and Communication*, 2021; 9(2): 167–177. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3809

1 Introduction

1.1 A turn to futures in the journalistic field

The journalism industry is becoming increasingly and deliberately oriented towards the future as it navigates the threats, opportunities and transformations emerging from its transition to digital, networked media (Franklin, 2014; Manninen et al., 2022). Amidst this growing future orientation, a range of actors—from individual journalists and news organisations' innovation labs to think tanks, consultancies and research institutions—produce expectations, predictions, trend analyses, scenarios and other forms of anticipation on the possible futures of news and journalism (Lowrey & Shan, 2018; Newman, 2021). These forward-looking conceptions promise to mitigate the industry's uncertainty by offering insights into where journalism might be headed and suggesting new, innovative ways forward (Creech & Nadler, 2018). Over time, these anticipations contribute to the reshaping of journalism as they materialise into new practices of producing, disseminating and consuming news (Peters & Broersma, 2017; Brown et al., 2000).

As anticipated futures inform and shape present decisions, projects and practices, it becomes imperative to systematically examine their content, the collective understandings that shape them and the diverse actors involved in their construction. This dissertation investigates perceptions and embodiments of journalism's futures by focusing on a particularly future-oriented group among news professionals: so-called 'pioneer journalists', who actively imagine possible futures as they develop new journalistic practices, forms, technologies, revenue streams, audience strategies and organisational models (Hepp & Loosen, 2019). In doing so, they contribute to the ongoing digital renewal of journalism by influencing how the broader journalistic field, including legacy news media, envisions and prepares for its futures.

Pioneer journalists renew journalism—as an industry, professional field and normative imaginary—by, on the one hand, addressing the pressing economic, social, institutional and technological challenges of digitalisation. These pressures include the decline in the economic viability of news as the digital transformation has drastically reduced advertising revenues (Lehtisaari et al., 2018). Digitalisation has also eroded journalism's authority and audience trust because the news media no longer hold a quasi-monopoly over public information or exercise the same control

over public discussion as they once did (Nadler & Vavrus, 2015; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). Editorial processes have likewise become increasingly dependent on global technology giants, algorithmic platforms and metrics-based news production and distribution (Westlund & Ekström, 2018). Furthermore, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) has raised concerns that automation could replace many—if not most—newsroom tasks currently performed by human journalists (Lindén, 2017).

On the other hand, as typically online-only news providers, pioneer journalists are positioned to harness the opportunities afforded by digital media. Digital technologies have opened up novel ways to produce and distribute journalism, including practices that circumvent algorithmic mediation (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2018). The low costs of digital production have enabled new outlets and other actors to enter the field, where they contribute to a more diverse and pluralistic news landscape (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). In addition, emerging forms of audience engagement promise renewed interest and trust, while subscriptions and other forms of direct audience income have fuelled optimism about journalism's renewed economic sustainability (Nelson, 2021).

These challenges and opportunities illustrate the contradictory pressures and trajectories that journalists must grapple with in the digital-media landscape. Their efforts are further complicated by the competing technological and journalistic norms that characterise contemporary news work (Wu et al., 2019). Shaped and conditioned by these relational forces, pioneer journalists navigate this environment by drawing on both technological and journalistic conceptions of what digital journalism could and should be (Hepp, 2024). It is this intersection of experimental imagination, creative agency, normative imaginaries, material structures and power relations that the present study seeks to illuminate.

1.2 Conceptual focus: Futures knowledge in journalism

By studying pioneer journalists, this study sheds light on the conceptions and normative ideals that underlie, inform, legitimise and inspire future-oriented projects and approaches in contemporary journalism. Collectively, these shared understandings constitute the 'futures knowledge' of the journalistic field. Futures knowledge can be defined as plausible, justified, collectively acknowledged and fact-based yet visionary beliefs about what the future might entail (Malaska, 2017; Pouru et al., 2019). In addition to empirically grounded projections and systematic foresight, it encompasses hopes, expectations, imaginaries and other more informal and tacit conceptions that orient individual and collective life towards the future. As with any form of knowledge, the production, interpretation, and implementation of

futures knowledge are shaped by evolving economic, political, and material conditions, socio-cultural meanings, competing interests and power relations (Beckert & Suckert, 2021). This embeddedness makes futures knowledge a critical domain for empirical inquiry into the contemporary journalistic field (Mische, 2009): it concerns present-day journalism at least as much as its futures.

Futures knowledge that is perceived as plausible and legitimate often originates from established institutions, such as the Reuters Institute, which publishes influential reports on digital news and technology predictions (Lowrey et al., 2023). In contrast, pioneer journalists typically operate outside established institutions or in experimental teams within them. Studying pioneer journalists can thus enhance our understanding of nascent, not-yet-established conceptions of journalism and its futures. Moreover, as pioneers mediate between distinct fields—such as journalism and theatre (Lyytinen, 2020)—they help uncover the futures knowledge that is emerging at these intersections.

1.3 Empirical focus: Pioneer journalists as change agents

Futures knowledge is essential to pioneers' creative agency because it attunes them to the unrealised potentials of digital journalism and frames which futures are considered possible and desirable. This study focused on the futures knowledge and agency of three distinct pioneer groups: entrepreneurial journalists who have founded or work at an independent news outlet, journalism experts and practitioners who contribute to the annual 'journalism predictions' by the Nieman Lab of Harvard University and 'intrapreneurs' engaged in an experimental live journalism project at the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. Together, these three groups cover journalistic pioneering across emerging news outlets, legacy news organisations and expert-knowledge production.

Within futures studies, pioneering is typically understood as microlevel social, technological and other processes of change driven by individual agents (Heinonen & Karjalainen, 2019). In the aggregate, these acts are seen as driving macrolevel societal changes by altering established routines and institutions (Bell & Mau, 1971). In contrast, by focusing on socially shaped futures knowledge as elemental to pioneers' agency, this study moved beyond the individual-centric conceptualisations of creative agency typical of the futures field. It contributes to broadening the understanding of agency in futures studies by conceptualising it as a relational phenomenon, embedded in dynamically evolving socio-material relationships that continually reconfigure actors' capacities to act (Ahlqvist & Uotila, 2020; Crossley, 2022; Prandini, 2015).

1.4 The technological field as a context for pioneer journalists' futures knowledge

With the digital transformation of news, professional journalism has become embedded within the broader field of digital media. As a result, diverse actors within this landscape are influencing how journalism, its futures and its normative foundations are conceived (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Wu et al., 2019). Journalistic practices are increasingly shaped by digital technologies, such as data analytics and new distribution platforms (Min & Fink, 2021; Newman, 2021). At the same time, the boundaries of journalism have become blurred with the involvement of non-professional actors such as bloggers, citizen journalists and news users in journalistic processes—from data gathering and reporting to distribution and commentary (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018; Loosen, 2015).

Against this backdrop, the thesis analyses pioneer journalists' futures knowledge and forward-looking practices in relation to the normative ideas and imaginaries of digital media. Building on relational conceptualisations of agency and futures knowledge, it views the field of information and communication technologies (henceforth, 'the technological field') as a key socio-material context in which journalistic futures knowledge is articulated and shaped (Ahlqvist & Uotila, 2020; Hepp, 2024). Prior research has shown that dominant visions of journalism's futures are colonised by technological conceptions, which frame the future as the prevalence of data-driven, productivity-focused, innovation-centred and user-oriented newsrooms (Creech & Nadler, 2018). More utopian technological imaginaries highlight the organisational and social dimensions of digital technologies by envisioning a decentralised and de-institutionalised news landscape (Starkman, 2011).

Despite their influence, these broader dimensions of technological norms in journalism remain underdiscussed and understudied. For example, journalistic innovation experts interviewed by Posetti (2018) expressed concern over a 'shiny new things syndrome', wherein the news industry's instrumental fixation on the latest tools and technologies has come at the expense of a broader, normative vision for digital journalism. Similarly, Wu et al. (2019) observed that research on journalism and digital technologies often focuses on discrete tools while neglecting the wider influence of the technological field—its norms, practices and visions that shape how technologies are developed and deployed.

Technological ideals, imaginaries, and approaches extend into the journalistic field through ongoing interactions and power struggles between technological and journalistic domains (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Wu et al., 2019). Journalism's entanglement with the technological field is pronounced among pioneer journalists, who often embrace technology-inspired approaches while remaining grounded in journalistic norms and practices such as factual reporting, editorial autonomy,

critical inquiry, and a commitment to serving the public rather than private interests (Deuze, 2005; Harte et al., 2016; Singer, 2015). By embodying a technological journalistic ethos, pioneer journalists act as vanguards and mediators of this broader digital mindset in journalistic practice (Hepp, 2024). Studying them can thus illuminate how the technological field influences normative expectations and forward-leaning practices in journalism. A critical examination of these technological norms and imaginaries, in turn, helps articulate normative visions for digital journalism that are more firmly grounded in journalistic norms and values.

1.5 The academic context and research gaps

To analyse pioneer journalists' futures knowledge and agency in the contemporary digital-media landscape, this study integrated theories, concepts and methodologies from futures studies, journalism studies and sociology. This interdisciplinary approach responded to calls for closer integration between futures studies and social theory (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015; Mandich, 2017). As Urry (2016) noted, while an orientation towards the future is a fundamental dimension of social life—that shapes decision-making from individuals' everyday lives to organisational and institutional strategies—the social sciences have largely overlooked the study of anticipated, represented and enacted futures (see also Mische, 2009; Poli, 2017). The social sciences are often ill equipped to investigate alternative futures because they typically conceptualise the future as a linear extension of past trends, established social structures and routinised behaviour (Beckert, 2013; Mische, 2009). In other words, they lack adequate theories and methodologies to investigate creative, projective agency and to account for discontinuities in social, economic, technological and other trends (Bell & Mau, 1971; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Conversely, while futures studies addresses such discontinuities, it has often neglected social theory—especially critical social theory (Fuller & Loogma, 2009; Slaughter, 2002, 2020). As Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015) observed, 'Futures studies has always been robust in tools and methods, but less advanced in socio-theoretical contemplation' (p. 92). This practical orientation stems not only from the role of futures studies in supporting decision-making in public and private organisations but also from its historical tendency to define itself in opposition to social theory and its perceived overemphasis on social structures (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015; Bell & Mau, 1971).

In combining perspectives from social theory and futures studies, this thesis follows what Mische (2009) called 'sociolog[ies] of the future'—that is, examinations of 'how future projections—often tenuous and uncertain—shape and are shaped by social processes' (p. 702). Rather than anticipating possible futures, sociological inquiries of futures focus 'on the cultural, institutional, and relational

grounding of future projections' (p. 702). In particular, this thesis engages with the 'sociology of expectations', which examines how both tacit and explicit expectations influence decisions and actions in innovation and development processes (Van Lente, 2012).

Within the futures field, similar present-focused notions are applied in 'anticipation studies', which examines anticipation as such and the systems through which futures are anticipated (Miller, 2018; Poli, 2010). Anticipation studies takes seriously the paradox at the heart of futures studies: the future cannot be known empirically, yet knowledge is produced about it. What *can* be known are the assumptions, visions, expectations, logics, mechanisms, decision-making processes and practices that constitute actors' or other systems' predictive models and the resulting behaviours, actions or responses (Beckert, 2013). Anticipation is thus treated as an empirical phenomenon that can be studied like any other domain of empirical research (Fuller, 2017). However, anticipation studies differs from sociological perspectives in its pragmatic orientation: it aims to help improve actors' anticipatory models and capacities rather than engage in a critical analysis of socially constructed futures (Miller, 2018).

Through its transdisciplinary approach, this thesis extends the scope of inquiry in both futures studies and journalism studies. While journalism studies focuses on the ongoing changes and transformations in journalism, research that explicitly investigates futures and their socio-material construction remain scarce (see Ananny & Finn, 2020; Barnhurst & Nightingale, 2018; Kumpu, 2016; Lowrey & Shan, 2018). Likewise, futures studies has barely explored the futures of news and journalism. The limited existing research concerns news business and management (Viljakainen & Toivonen, 2014), news automation (Kim & Kim, 2017, 2021) and representations of futures in the news media (Kumpu, 2013; Laurell & Sandström, 2018).

This study contributes to futures studies first by applying sociological perspectives to examine the construction of the futures of journalism. It draws on 'expectations' (Brown et al., 2000) and 'social imaginaries' (Taylor, 2004) as complementary to more conventional futures concepts, such as images of the future. These approaches deepen our understanding of not only *what* futures knowledge actors possess (Pouru et al., 2019) but also of the interests, relationships, material conditions and cultural meanings involved in its production. In other words, sociological approaches can offer a detailed view of the specific social, cultural and material forces that are taking part in the production of knowledge of journalism's futures (Ahlqvist & Uotila, 2020).

Second, the study advances pioneer analysis as a futures methodology (Heinonen, 2017) by focusing on the socio-materially embedded agency of pioneers. Rather than treating pioneers simply as originators of innovative ideas and practices,

the study highlights the social, normative and material influences that contribute to their creative agency. It advocates for grounding pioneers' futures knowledge more firmly in the complexities of the present social reality and encourages critical assessments within this context (Adam & Groves, 2007; Minkkinen, 2020a; Virmajoki, 2022).

In journalism studies, the thesis contributes to the futures-oriented examination of entrepreneurial and pioneer journalism (Hepp & Loosen, 2019). While previous research focused on the conceptions and practices of entrepreneurial and other pioneer journalists, their normative perceptions of journalism's futures and the influence of these imagined futures on journalistic practices remains understudied (Broersma & Singer, 2021; Carlson & Usher, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2019). Besides aspirational futures knowledge, the study also increases the understanding of specific journalistic practices, such as the language used in the daily reporting by entrepreneurial news outlets.

1.6 Research questions and overview of the thesis

The above-described considerations and points of departure give rise to the following three research questions (RQs).

RQ1. What futures knowledge do pioneer journalists draw on and reproduce in their self-descriptions, journalistic conceptions and imaginations of the futures of journalism?

RQ2. How do pioneer journalists recreate journalistic practices based on their futures knowledge?

RQ3. What norms, ideals and imaginaries underpin pioneer journalists' futures knowledge and journalistic practices?

The thesis comprises five articles, three of which examine futures knowledge. Article I studies *explicit* futures knowledge via semi-structured interviews with Finnish entrepreneurial journalists (RQ1), while article III examines it in the Nieman Lab's annual journalism predictions (RQ1). Article II explores *implicit* futures knowledge by analysing the 'About Us' pages of entrepreneurial journalism outlets (RQ1). These pages not only describe what the outlets currently do but also express their aspirations and visions for how journalism should evolve within the digital-media environment.

Three articles explore journalistic practices. Article IV analyses the journalistic styles in the daily news of entrepreneurial news outlets (RQ2). Article V examines on-stage live journalism manuscripts by pioneering intrapreneurs at the Finnish legacy newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (RQ2). Article I investigates how journalists describe their current practices and articulate expectations for future practices (RQ2).

The norms, ideals and imaginaries that underpin pioneer journalists' conceptions, practices and expectations are examined and discussed across all five articles and in the synthesis of key findings presented in section 6 (RQ3).

2 Theoretical Framework

This study employed a theoretical and conceptual framework that enabled a present-focused, socio-theoretical analysis of pioneer journalists as both creators and representatives of journalism's futures. This approach required a re-evaluation of some foundational assumptions within futures studies regarding the role of individuals and their imaginations in shaping alternative futures. For a socio-theoretical pioneer analysis, it is essential to understand both the future-oriented agency of pioneer journalists—their aspirations, anticipations and journalistic ideas and practices—and the socio-material relationships within which their agency is embedded.

While processes of change unfold partly independently of human will and agency, they become intelligible through the knowledge that actors produce about them. Given the essential role of knowledge in shaping how actors perceive and engage with the future, the concept of futures knowledge (section 2.1) is at the heart of this thesis's theoretical framework. Futures knowledge is conceptualised on two interconnected levels. First, the concept of 'expectations' is employed to capture the relatively near-term anticipations upon which pioneer journalists draw to navigate the challenges and opportunities of the contemporary media environment (section 2.2). Second, these expectations are contextualised within broader 'social imaginaries' (section 2.3), which embed them in wider social meanings and collective visions of the future.

Socially shared conceptions of futures are then examined as a core element of 'human agency' (section 2.4). Futures knowledge and human agency are conceptualised as 'relational' (section 2.4.1), thereby shifting the focus from microlevel actors and macro-level social structures to the meso-level connections and relationships between actors. Finally, the theoretical framework introduces 'entrepreneurial pioneer journalists' as embodiments of futures-oriented agency in journalism (section 2.5).

2.1 Epistemologies of futures knowledge

The future does not exist—at least from a human perspective—and, yet, actors continually produce knowledge about it. The various epistemologies of futures

studies seek to address this apparent paradox. A seminal contribution was made by Bell (2003), who proposed 'critical realism' as a foundational epistemology for the field. According to critical realism, knowledge is grounded in empirical observations of an objective reality that exists independently of the observer. However, critical realists regard such knowledge as inherently uncertain and fallible and subject to ongoing critique and revision (Bell, 2003). Bell argued that because futures knowledge is based on observations of empirical reality, it is not fundamentally different from knowledge of the present or the past. According to critical realists, all knowledge is conjectural (Aligica, 2011); futures knowledge is simply more so because it relies more heavily on interpretation and speculation in the absence of direct evidence (Malaska, 2017).

By emphasising observations of an objective reality, critical realists tend to downplay the social construction of futures knowledge. By disregarding the contexts in which such knowledge is produced, they risk concealing the interests and normative goals it serves (Slaughter, 2002). In adopting an objectivist orientation to knowledge, realist epistemologies typically cater to the needs of strategic foresight and anticipatory planning (Tapio & Hietanen, 2002). In contrast, 'constructionist-emancipatory' epistemologies argue that knowledge production is framed by cognitive, social and normative schemas through which present reality is perceived, interpreted and projected into the future (Virmajoki, 2022). According to social constructionists, neglecting these social and cultural dimensions often results in techno-deterministic and oversimplified perspectives that obscure the role of power in the construction of knowledge (Slaughter, 2002). To better grasp the plurality of competing interpretations of futures, they stress the importance of critical and value-oriented discussions about them (Fuller & Loogma, 2009).

Traditionally, realist approaches have dominated the futures field, while constructionist epistemologies have played a more marginal role (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). However, contemporary futures studies is increasingly characterised by epistemological and theoretical pluralism rather than the predominance of any single approach (Minkkinen, 2020b). This diversification reflects the field's growing engagement with social science theories and methodologies as well as a recognition of the complexity and multiplicity of futures themselves (Gidley, 2016).

As part of this theoretical diversification, recent conceptualisations have responded to the limitations of earlier futures epistemologies by adopting relational-networked perspectives (Ahlqvist & Uotila, 2020). Relational epistemologies emphasise that knowledge is produced through communicative interactions in specific contexts while still acknowledging the role of an empirical, external reality (Fu, 2021). Dufva (2015), for instance, defined networked futures knowledge as produced, interpreted and disseminated in both formal and informal communities of collective learning and sense-making. Along the same lines, Pouru et al. (2019)

distinguished between understanding futures knowledge as an 'object' and as a 'network of concepts'. The object-based view aligns with the conventional futures approaches that produce scenarios, trend lists, weak signals—first signs of potential change—and other discrete units of formalised futures knowledge intended for strategic use.

The network-based view, by contrast, conceives of futures knowledge as less formal, evolving conceptual networks that are specific to particular social contexts (Kurki, 2020). Rather than offering universal insights into the future, this pragmatist perspective frames futures knowledge as locally situated, dynamic mental models through which actors and groups make sense of futures that matter specifically to them (Pouru et al., 2019). Kurki (2020) identified this type of contextual futures knowledge in pioneer organisations, such as technology startups. These organisations consider foresight essential to their operations but integrate projective knowledge directly into daily activities and discussions rather than relying on formal foresight processes. In other words, they generate futures knowledge through work routines, development projects and responses to emerging organisational needs. By interpreting future potentials from their internal perspectives, these organisations actively pursue preferred trajectories instead of treating the future as an empirical given.

As the above discussion shows, robust futures knowledge is not necessarily 'true' or definitively ascertained but is recognised as valid by specific groups who act according to their understandings of futures (Rossel, 2012). From this perspective, building epistemological plausibility is a social process of communication, dissemination and legitimation rather than empirical verification. Along these lines, Van Dijk (2011) highlighted how decision-making often relies less on rigorously ascertained facts and more on stories and visions that resonate with decision-makers.

2.2 Futures knowledge as expectations

The contextual, tacit and practice-oriented view of futures knowledge occupies a relatively minor role in futures studies, which typically focuses on scenarios and other explicit and systematic explorations of alternative futures. However, this perspective has been extensively theorised and developed within the sociology of expectations. Drawing on classical sociologists, such as Max Weber, Alfred Schütz and Talcott Parsons (Beckert, 2016), research within this field views human behaviour as inherently future-oriented because 'decisions and activities are framed by intentions and ideas about a future situation' (Van Lente, 2012, p. 772). These 'intentions and ideas' are conceptualised as expectations—ongoing orientations towards anticipated futures that permeate individual and collective life.

The sociology of expectations has emerged in response to the growing prevalence of foresight activities and imagined futures within contemporary techno-scientific societies and innovation-driven market economies. According to Brown and Michael (2003), this widespread future-orientation underscores the need for the social sciences to engage with anticipated futures as an analytical object. They called for a shift in 'the analytical angle from *looking into* the future to *looking at* the future, or how the future is mobilized in real time to marshal resources, coordinate activities and manage uncertainty' (p. 4, emphases in the original).

Rooted in science and technology studies (STS), research within the sociology of expectations has traditionally focused on the articulation and enactment of expectations in research, development and innovation processes, such as the advancement of novel medical treatments or energy technologies (Borup et al., 2006). Over time, the field's influence has extended beyond STS (Halford & Southerton, 2023; Tutton, 2023) to areas such as journalism studies (Brennen et al., 2022; Schaetz & Schjøtt, 2025) and economic sociology (Beckert & Ergen, 2021). Across these areas, expectations provide uncertain projects with motivation, direction and legitimation, mobilise resources, attract private investment and draw broader public and professional interest. In mundane everyday work, they also perform crucial coordinating functions by guiding project activities, setting near-term goals, helping define roles and clarifying duties (Brown & Michael, 2003).

Unlike scenarios, roadmaps, images of the future and other formal representations of futures, expectations encompass more implicit conceptions of future possibilities (Berkhout, 2006). Despite their often-tacit nature, expectations imply a collective or individual commitment to pursue—or avoid—a possible future (Michael, 2000). Not all images of the future are necessarily expectations (for the concept of images of the future, see section 2.3). As Berkhout (2006) explained:

> Just because something has been expressed as a possibility (an option), does not mean that it has achieved the status of an expectation. Once it succeeds in becoming an expectation through the accrual of private and collective commitments, it also comes to embody the interests of those actors, who pursue it by embedding it in their behaviour and problem solving. (p. 302)

Expectations are typically embedded in actors' immediate and specific contexts. For instance, a consumer might cut back on spending because they expect an economic downturn after reading news that portends economic hardships. Newspaper editors might increase hyperlocal reporting as they anticipate the audience for such news to grow based on metrics provided by the data department. Developers of generative AI might focus on enhancing its 'reasoning' capabilities because they collectively expect AI models to take on tasks once exclusive to humans and eventually evolve

into general artificial intelligence that equals or surpasses human abilities. As these examples suggest, expectations serve as individuals' decision-making heuristics, but they are articulated through communication and circulate among actors (Konrad, 2006).

Despite their conceptual distinction, informal-tacit expectations and formal-explicit futures knowledge exist on a continuum rather than as entirely separate forms of anticipation. Because expectations are intrinsic to human behaviour and social action, they are abundant and penetrate all spheres of life (Berkhout, 2006). Expectations can be conceived as an omnipresent 'sea' of ideas, assumptions, arguments and sentiments about the future that are continuously generated and drawn upon as part of social life (Van Lente, 2012). Formal futures knowledge is articulated and systematised from this 'sea' of expectations: foresight exercises often reveal, reflect and synthesise preexisting tacit expectations rather than produce entirely novel insights (Berkhout, 2006).

Expectations matter because they are performative: they are enacted in the present to realise an anticipated future (Michael, 2000). Viewing expectations as intrinsic to individual and social action helps explain why and how images of the future, scenarios and other forms of futures knowledge become actualised—how they gain traction and shape present choices, decisions and orientations (see Fergnani & Chermack, 2021). Certain expectations rise to prominence either because they are supported by empirical evidence or because the futures they promise appear especially compelling (Van Lente, 2012). These expectations circulate and evolve through societal discourse, including mass media, press releases, advertising, academic publications and conference presentations (Konrad, 2006). As a result of these communicative processes, some expectations gain traction while others lose prominence.

Once widely shared, some expectations become collective and are no longer attributable to specific actors but instead form a 'taken-for-granted social repertoire' (Konrad, 2006, p. 431) that guides collective action and frames debates about future possibilities. Collective expectations steer action and development in specific directions through dynamics such as self-fulfilling prophecies (Van Lente, 2012). For example, companies may act on a widely acknowledged expectation not because of an immediate business benefit but out of fear of appearing to lag behind their competitors (Konrad, 2006). The power of expectations is especially salient in uncertain fields that are undergoing disruptive transformations—such as the news industry—wherein they offer a shared sense of opportunities, risks and viable strategies (Schaetz & Schjøtt, 2025).

Expectations are dynamic and continuously rearticulated as their social and material contexts change—such as when the consumer adoption of a new product yields unexpected outcomes or when an anticipated technological feature fails to

materialise (Brown & Michael, 2003). During the early phases of a new technology or product, expectations often generate hype around its soon-to-be-realised potentials and promises (Konrad, 2006). These potentials can range from specific, near-term claims, such as 'the hallucination problem of large-language models will be mostly solved within the following year' to more general and longer-term ones, such as 'large-language models will evolve to general artificial intelligence within a decade'. As these expectations circulate through mass media, foresight institutes, public relations agencies, social-media platforms and other influential actors, they gain momentum and attract resources for further technological development (Beckert & Ergen, 2021). Yet, many expectations inevitably fail, and the initial hype gives way to disappointment. Unrealised expectations are then abandoned, reformulated or replaced with new ones that align more closely with current technological capabilities and socio-material conditions (Brown & Michael, 2003).

The expectations framework is relevant to this study because it situates futures knowledge within present conditions and treats it as intrinsic to everyday action. Most of the futures knowledge examined in the empirical analyses of this study reflects implicit rather than explicit articulations of journalism's futures. For example, when a news outlet states on its 'About Us' page that it 'aims to make journalism more audience-friendly by fostering news communities', it conveys an expectation about the direction journalism should take rather than describing a specific future. Similarly, when a journalism expert predicts that news organisations will seek new subscribers by 'doubling down on quality in the coming year', they are expressing an expectation within a specific near-term context rather than outlining a comprehensive future for journalism. In other words, expectations allow a nuanced and contextual lens for analysing journalists' future orientations and their dynamics in the rapidly evolving digital-media landscape. Embedded in practices and socio-material (media) environments, expectations link pioneers' perceptions of the future to their agency and the conditions that enable—or constrain—their realisation and circulation.

2.3 Futures knowledge as images of the future versus social imaginaries

While expectations enable the examination of projected futures in specific contexts, they may fall short of outlining more comprehensive and longer-term visions that transcend present constraints and possibilities (Bazzani, 2023). As a discipline, futures studies investigates these extended, alternative futures. Because the future cannot be directly observed, futures scholars typically locate it ontologically in actors' imaginations (Adam, 2011). They argue that because human actors can envision and pursue futures through conscious decisions and projects, embryos of

these futures exist in their imaginations (Pouru-Mikkola & Wilenius, 2021). These imaginative elements of futures knowledge are typically conceptualised as images of the future (Bell & Mau, 1971). The following discussion addresses this concept and its limitations before proposing social imaginaries as a complementary key concept for futures inquiry.

Images of the future are mental pictures or scenes of possible futures that actors construct to visualise and conceptualise the time ahead and proactively plan their actions (Bell, 2003). They are created from personal or shared observations, expectations, ideas, beliefs, values and opinions about futures (Heinonen, Kuusi, & Salminen, 2017). These images can comprise personal life trajectories as well as national-security concerns and ecological, planetary futures (Bell & Mau, 1971). Typically, images of the future refer to explicit, concrete representations of futures and pertain to relatively long-term horizons—futures distant enough to require active imagination (Minkkinen, 2020a).

The concept of an image of the future embodies two key ontological and epistemological premises that underpin much of mainstream futures studies (Aligica, 2011). First, futures scholars often conceptualise society as an ever-changing process in which individuals' initiative, self-determination, creativity and goal-seeking continually generate novelty and drive social transformation. Second, they regard ideas and beliefs—including images of the future—rather than social or material structures as foundational elements of social reality. As Bell and Mau (1971) argued, 'motivated individuals . . . their images of the future, and their resultant behaviors are the key elements that keep the system moving and bring a future into being in the present' (p. 18). Similarly, Polak (1973), who coined the concept, described images of the future as products of individuals' 'conscious, voluntary, and responsible' choices in shaping the future according to their will (p. 13). Actors' beliefs and values are therefore treated as the core research objects and analytical units of futures studies (Bell, 2003).

As an analytical concept, images of the future capture the basic human orientation towards the future. However, this breadth often results in conceptual ambiguity. What exactly is meant by an image of the future? For example, should political programmes or policy agendas be regarded as images of the future? What is the role of social and material processes in shaping them? Where do such images originate, and whose interests do they advance? How—and through what processes and mechanisms—do they influence human agency and broader societal transformations? Reflecting these questions, Fergnani and Chermack (2021) argued that futures studies has yet to explicate how and why actors' futures conceptions translate into realised futures.

The individualistic and cognitive conception of images of the future risks oversimplifying the causal link between imagined and realised futures by

downplaying the role of socio-material relations, processes and dynamics in their generation, circulation and enactment (Adam & Groves, 2007; Mische, 2009). The futures of journalism, for instance, reside not only in individuals' imaginations but also in the ongoing, transindividual, socio-material processes of change—and continuity—within the present media environment and broader society (Groves, 2017). These processes shape the futures of journalism regardless of how journalistic actors imagine them. Such 'futures-in-the-making' (Adam & Groves, 2007) emerge through a complex interplay of journalistic actors' creative agency; prevailing journalistic norms, practices and organisational models; the infrastructures and actors of digital media (e.g. social media platforms); broader social and societal expectations of journalism; and power relations across all these dimensions.

Another limitation concerns the concept's explicit futurism, which can obscure more subtle, present-focused dimensions of projective thinking. By emphasising the future in its very formulation, the concept of an image of the future draws a sharp distinction between the present and the future. It encourages attention to what is changing rather than to what persists. Polak (1973) argued that the affective appeal of images of the future lies in their visions of 'a radically different world in an Other time' (p. 13). In doing so, the concept often empties the future of present conditions and complexities and instead presents it as a realm of radical novelty (Adam & Groves, 2007). While such temporal 'othering' can make images of the future affectively compelling, it can lead to a shallow consideration of the interconnected social, technological, ecological, political, economic and cultural changes that are already underway (Minkkinen, 2020a).

As a third limitation, images of the future often downplay social discourses and other, more abstract dimensions of futures knowledge (Minkkinen, 2020a). While images of the future manifest underlying beliefs and values, these normative elements are not necessarily explicitly articulated and analysed. As discrete pictures or 'snapshots' of what individuals imagine the future to be like, images of the future skew towards the concrete and the particular. They capture the contents—the 'whats'—of imagined futures and relegate broader socio-cultural reflections to a lesser role (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015). However, like any form of knowledge, images of the future are always produced within specific cultural, social, political and economic contexts (Rubin, 2013). These conditions often remain implicit and understudied—critical, socio-theoretical analyses of images of the future are relatively rare (Adam & Groves, 2007; Kaboli & Tapio, 2018).

Due to these socio-theoretical shortcomings, a sociologically oriented futures inquiry calls for a conceptual diversification that better captures the nuances and dynamics of everyday futures thinking, addresses multiple levels of analysis (such as the near term and the long term) and attends to the social and material groundings of imagined futures. In addition to expectations, as discussed in section 2.2, the

concept of imaginaries is increasingly deployed in futures inquiries to position images of the future within collective frameworks of meaning, socio-cultural discourses and material practices (Beckert, 2013; Bina et al., 2020; Haupt, 2021; Lehtiniemi & Ruckenstein, 2019).

The conceptualisations of imaginaries in futures studies—futures imaginaries (Minkkinen, 2020a), imaginaries of the future (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015) and sociotechnical imaginaries (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015)—all emanate from the concept of 'social imaginaries'. These refer to the ways in which societies and social groups collectively imagine and make sense of their social reality through deeply ingrained symbols, beliefs, norms, ideals, ideas, affects, values and other socio-cultural material (Vanheeswijck, 2017). Social imaginaries provide a framework for understanding what is considered meaningful, valuable and normative within a society or its subgroups. As such, they form the foundation for social organisation, collective life and shared meaning, thereby underpinning the development of institutions, practices and shared norms. Taylor (2004), who popularised the concept, defined social imaginaries as follows:

> [They refer to the] ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations. (p. 23)

While images of the future stress the primacy of ideas in catalysing social change, social imaginaries integrate both ontological idealism and materialism (Taylor, 2004). From the perspective of social imaginaries, ideas, cultural meanings, practices and the material world are mutually constitutive (Tutton, 2017). Imaginaries are not purely cognitive or discursive; they are materialised through artifacts, technologies, practices and infrastructures that embody and stabilise collective visions of the future (Jasanoff & Kim, 2015). At the same time, material conditions—such as technological capabilities or ecological realities—shape the formation of social imaginaries by influencing their plausibility, credibility and actionability (Altstaedt, 2023).

Social imaginaries originate sociologically from Durkheim's collective representations and philosophically from Kant's transcendental categories that are reconceptualised as historical, cultural and temporal rather than universal and atemporal (Gilleard, 2018; Vanheeswijck, 2017). Social imaginaries constitute the pre-individual and preconceptual background that renders experience of the surrounding socio-material world intelligible and meaningful (Vanheeswijck, 2017). Their capacity to support a shared, legitimate and common-sense social reality stems,

in part, from their imaginative-affective meaning that cannot be reduced to language and symbolic representations (Binder, 2019; Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019).

By providing a shared sense of purpose, social imaginaries enable common practices and an orientation towards the future (Taylor, 2004). They form the backdrop against which images of the future or expectations are conceived and articulated while supplying motivation and legitimacy for their realisation. It is social imaginaries, rather than individual actors, that imbue imagined and expected futures with meaning and affective appeal (Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2015). They shape anticipation by providing a shared sense of plausibility and desirability (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). They contribute to social and societal changes by influencing what types of social existence people can imagine and regard as normal and what they can reasonably expect from the future (Ananny & Finn, 2020). In doing so, social imaginaries highlight the normativity of temporal change—the interests, values and purposes embedded in social imaginaries shape what changes are pursued and seen as valuable (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Karhunmaa, 2019). The more socially accepted and established a social imaginary is, the more plausible and credible the futures it represents tend to appear (see Virmajoki, 2022).

Social imaginaries also underline the temporal contextuality of futures knowledge. Whereas images of the future pertain explicitly to futures, social imaginaries operate simultaneously in several temporal dimensions. Like imagination, social imaginaries synthesise the past, present and future, such that one temporal dimension cannot be separated from another (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019). In this way, social imaginaries can help embed expectations, images of the future and other futures knowledge more firmly in social reality by illuminating the connections between imagined futures and the socio-material world of the present and the past (Minkkinen, 2020a).

Despite their embeddedness in a shared social reality, social imaginaries involve an essential creative dimension. Human imagination can surpass existing meanings and conceptions, thus allowing for the exploration of new and innovative possibilities (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). The synthesis of social representations and creative imagination makes social imaginaries both agentic and structural, whereas images of the future prioritise agency over structures (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019). Situated between the actor-structure dichotomy, social imaginaries align with relational conceptions of human agency. Social imaginaries are maintained and renewed in the interactions between actors, but they cannot be reduced to either the individual actor or social structures (see section 2.4). Therefore, besides human imagination, the heterogeneity of actors, interests and ideas involved in these relationships and interactions is another source of creative novelty in social imaginaries (DeLanda, 2016).

Along these lines, Liao and Iliadis (2021) underlined the importance of comprehending how various futures discourses and visions intersect and mutually shape each other in the formation of alternative futures. In the context of the present study, social imaginaries can aid in mapping out the connections, similarities and differences between the anticipated futures of journalism and those of the technological field. These discursive and imaginative intersections deserve attention as they can bring forth novel conceptions of what journalism is and could be—some of which can be detrimental to core journalistic norms, roles and functions (Creech & Nadler, 2018; Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008).

2.4 Agency in futures studies

Both futures studies and the traditional social sciences examine the role of human agency in transformations of social systems—such as the profession, institution and industry of journalism—but they approach the question differently. By focusing on social structures, social scientists often reduce human agency to actors' iterations of past beliefs and routines (Mische, 2009; Urry, 2016). Giddens's (1984) influential structuration theory, for instance, framed agency as inseparable from social structures rather than as a creative force that is at least partially free from structural forces (DeLanda, 2016). Consequently, social scientists typically conceptualise futures as continuations of past trends and existing social structures, thereby producing a relatively static view of social reality (Mische, 2009).

Futures scholars have long criticised mainstream social theory for overemphasising social structures at the expense of the creative human agency that alters those structures (Bell & Mau, 1971; Giddens, 1984). As discussed in sections 1.5 and 2.3, futures scholars tend to conceive agency as individuals' self-determined, creative acts. In the collective, these acts are seen as disrupting social and institutional structures and generating nonlinear discontinuities from past trends (Amara, 1981; Andersson, 2012; Fuller & Loogma, 2009). Futures studies' ontological premise of multiple possible futures stems, in part, from this assertion of human agency as a source of emergence and novelty (Slaughter, 2020; Tutton, 2017). According to this view, human actors continuously renew the social world through their ideas and imaginations (Adam, 2004; Fuller & Loogma, 2009). Along these lines, futures studies scholars typically assume the future to be open—that is, to be imagined, designed and realised by volitional and creative human acts (Aligica, 2011).

In distinguishing futures studies from the traditional social sciences and emphasising its interest in creative human agency over social structures, Bell (1996) characterised the discipline as an 'action science' (p. 39). However, such agency-centric approaches have themselves been critiqued for leaning towards

methodological and ontological individualism (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). By focusing too narrowly on individual initiative, they may oversimplify the forces that drive social and societal change. Likewise, they risk neglecting the material conditions and power relations that shape human agency as well as the knowledge that informs it.

Although foundational to futures studies, human agency remains under-theorised and unproblematised within the field. From an individual-centric perspective, agency can either increase or decrease according to how much autonomy actors have or how motivated they are to act (Ahvenharju et al., 2018; Dufva & Dufva, 2019). What constitutes agency beyond individual and psychological traits is often left unanswered (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015; Aligica, 2011; Minkkinen, 2020a). Recent futures approaches addressed these gaps by moving beyond the actor–structure binary and conceptualising agency as a distributed, systemic phenomenon. Among these is the practice-oriented approach, which views agency and futures knowledge as co-constructed in shared practices (Fuller & Warren, 2006; Waehrens & Riis, 2010). Another is the complex adaptive systems perspective, which frames human agency as distributed across dynamic socio-material systems. Here, agency is embedded in networks of actors, technologies and institutions that adapt to constantly evolving conditions (Kuhmonen, 2017).

These two perspectives converge in a third approach of anticipatory systems (Poli, 2017). Unlike complex adaptive systems, which primarily emphasise distributed adaptation, anticipatory systems explicitly highlight futures-oriented processes. According to this perspective, futures are created and enacted through interactions within and between inherently anticipatory socio-material systems (Mandich, 2017). As these systems adapt to their ever-changing surroundings, they deploy and refine tacit and explicit mechanisms for anticipating both external changes and transformations within the system itself (Poli, 2017).

2.4.1 A relational view of agency

As practice- and system-oriented approaches demonstrate, human agency need not be conceived solely as the volitional acts of autonomous individuals nor reduced to macro-level social structures (Hepp, 2020). In social theory, agency has been reconceptualised as a property of relational formations such as ‘actor-networks’ (Latour, 2005), ‘rhizomes’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980) or ‘assemblages’ (DeLanda, 2016). By emphasising relationships between actors as the core units of social reality, these relational theories offer a ‘third way’ between methodological individualism, which assumes autonomous individuals as the elementary constituents of social life, and methodological holism, which considers social structures as the foundational social fact (Emirbayer, 1997).

According to relational approaches, agency is shaped, enabled and constrained in actors' evolving relations with other human and nonhuman actors in concrete and spatio-temporally specific situations and historical contexts (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Prandini, 2015). In actor-network theory, for instance, technologies such as mobile phones are treated as actors that shape human agency through their technological affordances and routinised—or creative—use (Latour, 2005). Yet, mobile phones or other technological actors do not exhibit singular, techno-deterministic effects; their influence is dependent on the actor networks in which they are deployed (Ryfe, 2022). These relations need not be physical or in-person. Social discourses also influence agency by, for instance, delineating what actions and approaches are considered appropriate or desirable.

Rather than assuming a decontextualised intention of rational and independent individuals pursuing their interests, relational perspectives conceptualise these very intentions and interests as shaped through actors' relationships within specific contexts. These evolving contexts are characterised by emergence: the present always differs from what preceded it, as new connections within and between relational formations continually take shape (Adam, 1990; DeLanda, 2016). Relational agency is, therefore, both situational and temporal: when actors orient themselves towards future possibilities, they assess their shifting circumstances and temporal horizons in relation to other actors, established routines and shared expectations. In their influential relational-temporal conceptualisation, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) defined agency as follows:

> . . . the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations. (p. 370)

In unpacking this dense definition, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) distinguished three interconnected temporal dimensions of human agency that account for both social stability and change: the past-based iteration of established patterns and beliefs, the future-oriented projectivity of potential outcomes and courses of action and the present-focused practical-normative evaluation of past schemas and future projections. Iteration is restorative action in which actors deploy past patterns of thought and action, thereby stabilising social life and sustaining its institutions. The iterational dimension manifests in the tacit and socially inherited schemas, routines and habits that orient actors' present choices and actions.

Projectivity refers to actors' imaginative generation of possible future trajectories of their planned actions. Projective action can creatively reconfigure

received habits of thought and action and shape them according to actors' expectations for the future. Finally, the practical-evaluative dimension concerns actors' normative and practical judgments of alternative trajectories of action. These evaluations are conducted within presently evolving situations and must respond to the emergent dilemmas, demands, relations and ambiguities specific to the present moment and its various contexts.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) stressed that both the projective and practical-evaluative dimensions of agency are deeply grounded in the habitual, established and largely unreflected schemas of action. They thus emphasised the role of history and social structures in shaping human agency. However, they also noted two central ways in which structure and history can be overcome. First, imagination in projective agency exceeds historical and structural determination. Through symbolic reconstructions, aspirations, fantasies, hopes, fears and other affective dimensions of imagination, individuals can break free from existing structures and bring forth novel forms of social life. This makes social imaginaries central to understanding human agency, as they incorporate both established schemas and creative imagination (Herbrik & Schlechtriemen, 2019).

Second, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) asserted that emergence in socio-material conditions disrupts social structures and prompts actors to reassess past schemas and alter established practices. As actors apply their projections and inherited frames to present-day situations, the evolving circumstances, conflicts and complexities compel them to collaboratively reevaluate the received wisdom. Like imagination, the situational processes of evaluation, improvisation and rearticulation of shared meanings can transcend structures and contribute to the ongoing renewal of shared social reality (Waehrens & Riis, 2010). Similar processes also underlie the dynamics of expectations, which are constantly reconsidered and reshaped in response to unfolding events and developments, such as failed technological promises (Liao & Iliadis, 2021).

Journalists readily exemplify these relational dimensions of agency and future orientation. They act by adhering to established journalistic practices, norms and ethics, which provide the general guidelines for professional practice. This manifests the iterative dimension of human agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Yet, journalists do not operate in isolation: they sustain and renew their profession through complex webs of relationships both within and beyond the journalistic field (Deuze & Witschge, 2020). Because prevailing professional routines do not necessarily align with the changing norms and material realities of the surrounding society, journalists must project how their profession might adapt to better accommodate these new conditions (Broersma & Singer, 2021). These projections and expectations are then collectively evaluated in journalists' mutual discussions, strategy meetings, trade-press commentaries and other professional forums before

being implemented into journalistic work, reshaped, or rejected altogether (Carlson, 2016).

This evaluative process is not confined to the journalistic field either. Contemporary journalism draws much of its meaning and authority from actors outside of journalism proper, such as audience communities and social media platforms (Carlson, 2017). These external actors participate in evaluating the evolving forms and burgeoning developments of journalism. Moreover, quasi-journalistic actors—such as bloggers, news influencers, advertisers and public-relations professionals—are increasingly adopting journalistic practices in their content production (Loosen, 2015). These actors not only evaluate but also implement new journalistic conceptions in practice. Because journalists reconsider their norms and practices also in response to the outputs of such 'interloper' actors, their agency is increasingly defined in relation to actors who have not traditionally been considered 'journalistic' (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). Concepts such as 'news ecosystem' and 'hybrid', 'networked' and 'ambient' journalism all highlight how journalism is increasingly shaped by its entanglements with these actors who are peripheral to its professional core (Steensen & Ahva, 2015).

The relationality of contemporary journalism and journalistic agency is intensified by the fact that, unlike most other professions, entry into journalism is not restricted by official qualifications, education or law. Instead, journalism largely remains an *imagined* profession (Zelizer, 2017). In the absence of formal boundary markers, it is subject to ongoing reimagining. Under these conditions, journalism is sustained and renewed through 'metajournalistic discourses'—perceptions, imaginations and discussions within the journalistic field and the wider public about what journalism is or should be and who counts as a journalist (Carlson, 2016; Zelizer, 1993). From a relational perspective, these discourses—articulated within and beyond the profession—are central to understanding the collective evaluation of journalism along with its simultaneous preservation and transformation. Because rearticulations of metajournalistic discourses engage society's broader views of journalism and its roles, social imaginaries and shared expectations play an essential role in these processes.

2.5 Entrepreneurial pioneer journalists as change agents

As described in the introduction, this study focused on entrepreneurial journalists as a specific group of journalistic pioneers. Entrepreneurial journalism refers to journalists who run their own media outlets or work for one, produce journalism in novel ways and develop new business strategies to sustain their work (Achtenhagen, 2017). Its underlying ethos of entrepreneurship involves the discovery and

exploitation of new, potentially profitable opportunities (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). This ethos can also manifest as intrapreneurship in legacy newsrooms' 'innovation labs' and other research & development units (Boyles, 2016; Cools et al., 2024). Driven by the entrepreneurial spirit, these journalists renew journalism by identifying untapped opportunities, exploring alternative futures and designing their output and journalistic models accordingly (Fuller & Warren, 2006). Due to their explicit orientation towards change, experimentation and novelty, entrepreneurial journalists provide a compelling case for a pioneer analysis of journalism's futures.

Driven by legacy media layoffs and the relatively low costs of operating digital news outlets, entrepreneurial journalists have become a formidable force in contemporary news media (Broersma & Singer, 2021). In journalism studies, entrepreneurial journalists are conceptualised as 'innovation agents' (Carlson & Usher, 2016) who not only create new businesses but also actively seek solutions to journalism's challenges in the digital age. Within the theoretical framework of this thesis, entrepreneurial journalists are central sources of new journalistic imaginaries, expectations and practices—they are key pioneers within the journalistic field who envision alternative futures and experiment with these ideas in practice. By sustaining these novel ideas and practices through established businesses, they can produce long-lasting changes in the relational and normative configuration of the journalistic field (Briggs, 2012).

Despite their innovation-oriented mindset, news entrepreneurs typically adhere to core professional routines, such as rigorous, critical and factual reporting (Tandoc, 2017). They ground their journalistic conceptions and expectations in professional norms, ethics and values, such as serving the democratic public and holding power to account (Carlson & Usher, 2016; Wagemans et al., 2019). In other words, as with pioneer journalists in general, entrepreneurial journalists' future-oriented agency builds on the iteration and evaluation of journalistic traditions in the context of digital media (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Waehrens & Riis, 2010).

While the entrepreneurial ethos makes these journalists salient subjects for futures-oriented investigations, two additional characteristics make them particularly relevant for a relational research design. First, since entrepreneurial journalists build their news operations from the ground up—free from many of the path dependencies of legacy news media but often with scarce resources—they are inclined to collaborate and draw on ideas from outside professional journalism (Brouwers, 2017; Usher, 2017). Although this openness to collaboration and cross-field exchange applies to pioneers more broadly, entrepreneurial journalists face a particularly strong material incentive to do so, as they rely on diverse financial sources such as investors, subscribers or members, crowdfunding campaigns, and foundations (Hepp & Loosen, 2019).

Second, because entrepreneurial journalists must also cultivate an audience from scratch, they often seek intimate, interactive and reciprocal relationships with audience members (Porlezza & Splendore, 2016; Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). They represent new, audience-centric journalistic models that emphasise serving audience needs (Wagemans et al., 2019) and thus stand at the forefront of journalism's audience and emotional turns (see sections 3.2 and 3.3). A relational study of entrepreneurial journalism can therefore deepen our understanding of how audiences—or, more precisely, journalists' conceptions of them—contribute to the remaking of journalism and to shaping the expectations that chart its potential future directions.

3 Imaginaries of the Futures of Journalism

This section contextualises the study by discussing four key developments that journalists and journalism scholars consider central to journalism's current landscape and potential futures. These trends provide the backdrop for pioneer journalists' expectations about the evolving journalistic profession and their reassessments of its norms and practices. They are not merely observable, factual phenomena; the trends also carry an imaginary dimension concerning the characteristics, normative orientations and potentials of digital journalism (Kunelius & Ruusunoksa, 2008). Embedded in broader social imaginaries, interpretations of these developments feed into journalists' professional imaginations about what journalism could be and how it should be practiced (Zelizer, 2017).

The first development concerns 'digital journalism' and journalists' interpretations of it. The digitalisation of news entails a rethinking of journalistic norms and practices, which often draws from the social imaginaries of digital technologies. As a holistic and multipronged concept, digital journalism serves as an umbrella term for the other three trends and themes in this section. The second development addresses the alleged 'audience turn' in contemporary journalism (Costera Meijer, 2020). The audience turn can be roughly distinguished into approaches that view audiences as either passive—but potentially lucrative—targets, or as active participants. The third theme describes another but related shift in recent journalism, an 'emotional turn' (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). With the new possibilities for personal expression enabled by the Internet, the contest for attracting users' affective attention on digital platforms and the new journalistic norms and practices that respond to these changes, many argue that news and journalism have transitioned to a new era characterised by affect and emotion.

As the term 'turn' implies, the audience and emotional turns both mark a reversal of past journalistic conventions. That is, traditionally, journalists kept their audiences at arm's length and claimed to avoid emotion in their reporting (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). The fourth trend, therefore, synthesises the previous three in emerging journalistic practices that focus on audiences, affects and emotions—audience engagement and engaged journalism (Nelson & Schmidt, 2022).

These four trends and phenomena constitute an essential part of the present context against which journalists reflect and reconsider their professional norms and routines, collectively make sense of the changes in the media environment and project futures for journalism and their own journalistic work. These developments are reflected in relation to the findings of the thesis in the discussion in section 6.

3.1 Digital journalism

Beyond the newsroom routines facilitated by digital technologies, 'digital journalism' is a powerful social imaginary that shapes how journalism is reimagined and practiced. As an imaginary, it is commonly associated with audience-centric approaches, which often reflect opposing digital logics: participatory, organic engagement on one hand and metrics-based, data-driven strategies on the other (Steensen et al., 2020). Because digital technologies enable interactive communication and information dissemination on a mass scale, journalism scholars have argued that journalists are normatively and ethically obliged to engage in closer cooperation with their audiences (Vos & Thomas, 2023). Digital journalists themselves often regard responding to audiences' wants, needs and behaviour as their most evident distinction from 'traditional', print and broadcast journalists (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). While researchers foreground the democratic dimensions of participation, digital journalists frequently take a more pragmatic view: instead of involving audiences directly in news production, they aim to stimulate audience interest and convert their attention into paid subscriptions or advertising revenue.

Besides audience-oriented journalistic traditions (Marchionni, 2015), such perceptions of digital journalism are influenced by the imaginaries of digital media. These imaginaries emphasise users' personal interests as the foundation for news consumption, participation, and community building (Kreiss & Brennen, 2016). Mirroring these imaginaries, Pavlik (1997) argued that digital journalism is meant to provide 'a personalized context' for the meaning of daily news and help 'build new communities based on shared interests and concerns' (p. 30). Contemporary journalism reflects these idealisations in its growing focus on niche interests, subscriber communities and news personalisation—each approach purportedly tapping into users' intrinsic motivation and authentic affinities (Lewis & Usher, 2013; Nechushtai & Zalmanson, 2021).

In addition to journalistic content and journalist-audience relationships, digital imaginaries also influence normative conceptions of journalistic work. Just as digital-media technologies are seen to cater to the interests and identities of news users, digital journalists are often expected to express themselves in news content through a personal and distinctive voice (Harbers, 2016). According to this

perception, journalists who wish to integrate into digital culture should display personal enthusiasm for specific topics and issues rather than remain detached observers (Ryfe, 2012). Reflecting the expectation of journalists' personal and subjective involvement in their work, the term 'passionate' has become a key qualifier for journalists sought in job advertisements (Lindén et al., 2021).

In sum, the dominant notions and practices of digital journalism emphasise the advantages of both technology-enabled news targeting and the formation of interest-based news communities (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020). Less frequently discussed, however, are the risks and downsides of interactive and personalised news. These include the increasingly detailed collection of data on news users, political, social and cultural polarisation that digital communication can potentially intensify, growing inequalities in news consumption and participation, and various forms of 'dark participation', such as the harassment of journalists by news users (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Quandt, 2018; Rydenfelt et al., 2022). The negative consequences of a passionate journalistic work ethic, such as stress and burnout due to the demands of emotional labour, are also only beginning to gain recognition (Trimithiotis & Stavrou, 2022).

3.2 An audience turn in journalism and journalism studies

In journalism studies, the recentring of news audiences has been conceptualised as an audience turn in both the journalism industry and academic research (Costera Meijer, 2020). In the era of pre-digital mass media, journalists typically paid little attention to audiences and their preferences. Instead, journalists reported on topics that they and their colleagues deemed newsworthy, gleaned information from political elites and kept a distance from their audiences in the name of journalistic autonomy (Nelson, 2021). With journalism's turn to audiences, these tendencies have been reversed. Today's journalists, editors, and media managers consider audiences' needs, behaviours, interests and networks essential to journalism's digital development (Hanusch & Tandoc, 2019; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012; Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020).

Besides audience-centric journalistic norms that emphasise democratic participation, journalism's audience turn has been driven by digital subscriptions and other forms of audience income, increasingly detailed data on audience behaviour and fervent competition for audiences' attention in the high-choice media environment (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). The rise of audiences has been intensified by information gatekeeping becoming much less controlled by the legacy media (Vermeer et al., 2020. Social media have transformed one-to-many mass communication into many-to-many, algorithmically mediated interpersonal

communication in which user networks on digital platforms take centre stage in content distribution (Villi, 2019). With digital technologies, audiences have become more capable of choosing news and other media content that reflect their needs and interests, have gained access to an increasingly diverse variety of news sources, easily move across different media forms (e.g. movie streaming versus news media) or avoid news altogether (Banjac, 2021). In turn, the determinants of audience trust have also shifted. Digital news users often determine whether to trust content depending on who shared it with them rather than the news brand that originally produced the content (Villi, 2019).

The audience turn entails an expectation of a more symbiotic and interactive relationship between journalists and audience members (Lewis, 2012; Vos & Thomas, 2023). In this vein, Lewis et al. (2014) conceptualised journalists' reimagined relationship with their audiences as a 'reciprocal journalism' that is grounded in exchanges between journalists and audiences instead of hierarchical, one-way news provision. Audience members can, for instance, provide journalists with news tips or other insights, and journalists can involve them in the production of news (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2020; Malmelin & Villi, 2016). Such reciprocal interactions can be key to establishing and sustaining journalistic communities. Reciprocity—exchanges for mutual benefit without an immediate expectation of return—is considered a core social mechanism for initiating and maintaining communal relations because it generates trust, connectedness and social capital between participants (Lewis et al., 2014). Reciprocal journalist-audience relationships have been observed, for instance, in news-related WhatsApp groups where journalists and audiences exchange ideas and views, cultivating more personal and trusting bonds in the process (Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2020).

A reciprocal, audience-centric journalism may seem like a largely desirable development because it evokes journalism's democratic and participatory ideals (Ferrucci, 2017). Yet, the so-called 'audience turn' is more ambiguous than simply a better consideration of audiences' needs and participation in news production. The centralisation and quasi-monopolisation of digital media, alongside the rise of algorithmic content distribution, have challenged the notion of audiences as autonomous news users and instead positioned them as objects of behavioural manipulation (Vos & Thomas, 2023).

Moreover, journalists imagine their audiences in different and often conflicting ways (Ferrucci et al., 2020). Blassnig and Esser (2022) conceptualised these imaginaries along two opposing news logics: a market-oriented commercial logic and a connection-strengthening audience logic. Within the commercial news logic, journalists perceive audience members as consumers to whose demands they respond. This logic prioritises maximising reach through sensationalist, emotional, privatised and human-interest news stories. In contrast, within the connection-

strengthening audience logic, journalists imagine their audience as active participants in both news production and democratic life. This logic manifests in practices such as the inclusion of common people's narratives and social-media posts in news stories, employing interactive tools, such as polls and commenting functions, and using accessible news language aimed to better engage audiences in public affairs (Blassnig & Esser, 2022).

According to Blassnig and Esser (2022), entrepreneurial, online-only news outlets often follow the connection-strengthening audience logic of news, whereas legacy media are more likely to adhere to the market-oriented commercial news logic. Other studies have reported similar findings. Ferrucci (2017), for instance, found that digital-native news nonprofits make news more understandable and contextualised, converse with citizens, involve them in agenda setting and encourage public action. Adhering to the connection-strengthening news logic, many entrepreneurial news operations seek a direct connection with audience members instead of an algorithmically mediated one. 'Hyperlocal' entrepreneurial news sites, for example, not only cover communities but also often become an organic part of them (Harlow & Chadha, 2018). However, these characteristics are typical for a particular group of entrepreneurial journalists—news nonprofits and cooperatives (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016). News startups, on the contrary, are more likely to mix the connection-strengthening and market-oriented logics in their news production (Carlson & Usher, 2016).

3.2.1 Problematising news users

The audience turn is accompanied by a conceptual shift from 'audiences' to 'news users' as the addressees and interlocutors of news content. This reconceptualisation highlights the more intentional relationship that audiences are perceived to have with digital news. A person's news usage covers activities such as the selection, interpretation and production of news content, including the discussing and sharing of news on social media (Picone, 2016). However, like the broader audience turn, 'news user' is not a straightforward concept. Users' acts and choices are, on one hand, manipulated for commercial or other instrumental ends by the algorithmic power of social-media platforms and other digital media (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Martin, 2021; Minkkinen, 2020a). On the other hand, users are not mere subordinates to the algorithms that organise and select the content shown to them. The affordances of digital media do open new opportunities for users to exercise autonomous agency, such as challenging dominant economic or technological narratives (Karakayali et al., 2018; Savolainen & Ruckenstein, 2022).

Despite journalists' discursive embrace of participatory audiences and active news users, criticism regarding the algorithmic manipulation of user choices is

increasingly addressed directly at news organisations (Van Dijck, 2009). In seeking to better understand audiences and their behaviour, the journalism industry has sought support from audience metrics to measure what news content audiences consume, for how long and how they interact with it (e.g. click, comment or share; Costera Meijer, 2020). News companies can use these insights to influence user behaviour, such as by using clickbait headlines (Simon, 2022). Instead of addressing audiences as partners, journalists often continue to perceive them primarily as targets—not only as receivers of media content but also as subjects whose behaviour can be nudged with increasingly efficient technological means (Costera Meijer, 2020; Simon, 2022).

Perceiving media audiences as active users has also contributed to individualised and unequal news consumption and participation (Kreiss et al., 2011). Contrary to the utopian visions of participatory media, research has consistently shown that media participation is unevenly distributed, with a small minority accounting for a vast majority of user contributions (Schneider, 2022; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Active news usage is biased towards elites and higher social grades, and, even within these groups, a small minority often drives most participatory production (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018; Lindell, 2018; Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Regarding journalism specifically, research has indicated that audiences show limited interest in participating in journalistic production and generally do not prefer to actively personalise their news (Quandt, 2018). Moreover, journalists themselves remain reluctant to involve audiences in the news production process (Thomas, 2022).

These critical observations reveal a paradox at the heart of digital journalism. Digital media have broadened the access to various news content and amplified diverse voices in public debate (Dubois & Blank, 2018; Ihlebæk et al., 2022). Yet, the discourses and imaginaries surrounding digital media presume an active, proficient and informed user. Those who fall short of these standards risk a deteriorating rather than nutritious news diet. Because the capacity to become an active news user depends on a person's social, cultural and economic capital, digital media may facilitate the rise of new 'information elites' instead of emancipating the grassroots, as was once expected (Robinson & Wang, 2018). These elite groups refer to network-savvy, resource-rich citizens who reconstitute society's information flows and excel in reflexive self-actualisation and mediated identity construction (Castells, 1997; Coombs & Cutbirth, 1998; Lash, 1994; Robinson & Wang 2018). Information elites include, for instance, opinion leaders in niche networks who exert influence also in the broader news ecology through their specialised knowledge (Ryfe, 2012; Wang et al., 2020).

Subject-specific online forums that aim for both personal and professional development have been popular among such elites for decades (Coombs & Cutbirth,

1998; Turner, 2006). Present versions of such semi-public communities—often organised in closed social media, messaging, or similar groups—are becoming increasingly popular among journalists, news users and other groups involved in communication and knowledge production (Chua & Westlund, 2019; Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). As a result, collaboration and reciprocal engagement between journalists and audience members seems to become concentrated within these walled gardens of information elites rather than emerging as widespread practices (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020).

3.3 An emotional turn in journalism

In the wake of the audience turn, media and journalism are allegedly undergoing another major shift: an emotional turn (Lecheler, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2020). Emotions have always been part of news, but today they are accentuated by the emotional and affective styles of journalistic delivery and public discussion on digital platforms (Papacharissi, 2014a, 2014b). For journalists, emotional techniques can appear as means to reconnect with audiences and create a more intimate and trustful relationship with them. According to Peters (2011), a journalist's emotional involvement and expressions of shared affect in journalistic content can induce mutual understanding with audience members. In line with this, many journalists believe that 'creating this bond [between journalists and audiences] can be achieved through the elicitation of emotional responses among audiences' (Lecheler, 2020, p. 287).

These tendencies are further amplified by the ubiquity of digital and social media. With personal mobile devices, news has become an integral part of people's everyday lives, alongside such affective activities as music streaming, gaming or group chats (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). With social media, news is increasingly perceived as an affective, social experience that is shared and discussed among friends, family members, wider social networks, and adversaries. Moreover, social-media platforms nudge users to express their affective states in public (Beckett & Deuze, 2016). This serves the instrumental needs of platform companies: emotions such as anger or delight capture users' attention, increase the time they spend on a platform, amplify the spread of content, and ultimately increase advertising revenue (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018).

The emotional turn entails an expectation of both personal and social involvement with the news—news as "collaboratively constructed out of subjective experience, opinion, and emotion" (Papacharissi, 2014b, p. 27). Journalists can cultivate this affective engagement by using emotionally and affectively rich registers, such as literary techniques (Peeters & Maeseele, 2023). The degree and style of emotionality in news can itself become a form of journalistic specialisation

by signalling affiliation with selected topics, genres or audiences (Peters, 2011). While restrained emotional expression is typically associated with news intended for the general public, distinct emotional styles can express affects and moods that resonate with particular communities of interest (Hipfl, 2018). The emotional turn thus marks a shift towards a more diverse range of emotional-affective journalistic registers that are tailored to specific topics and audience segments (Nelson, 2021).

The sense of involvement, community and personal meaning connects the emerging forms of emotional-affective news to the social imaginaries of the technological field. These technological imaginaries emphasise a construction of shared meaning in affinity-based media communities (Kreiss, 2018; Ryfe, 2012). In these imaginaries, new 'grassroots' digital news outlets reflect the affective interests, communicative styles and meaning-making practices of user communities (Benkler, 2006). When journalists focus on niche topics and adopt voices and registers typical of groups invested in these topics—such as local residents or tech developers—they partake in the construction of such communities of shared meaning. Lecheler (2020) connected the emotional turn of news to broader undercurrents in digital culture by arguing that emotion-driven journalism is characteristic of technologically advanced societies searching for meaning, purpose and social connection. These pursuits, and their commodification, play a central role in the evolving practices of audience engagement (Vodanovic, 2020), as is discussed in the following section.

3.4 Audience engagement and engaged journalism

In recent years, 'engagement' has emerged as a key concept for describing audiences' active and affective interest in the news (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2019). At its core, engagement encompasses news users' subjective, cognitive, affective and social experiences that sustain their interest in and attention to media content (Steensen et al., 2020). Another dimension of the concept is the resulting behaviour, such as spending time with a news article, becoming a paying subscriber, contributing to news production or otherwise participating in public life (Broersma, 2019; Nelson, 2021). Through users' sentiments, actions and behaviours, engagement is regarded as a key determinant of the success and circulation of digital-media content (Jenkins et al., 2013).

Despite being essential to both media strategies and academic research, engagement remains conceptually murky (Park et al., 2021). While engagement is a complex, qualitative phenomenon that is rooted in personal and social needs, desires and emotions, the news industry often reduces it to quantifiable metrics, such as clicks, likes, shares and comments (Steensen et al., 2020). This metrics-centric framing positions engaged news users as objects of algorithmic influence and sources of data and revenue (Ferrer-Conill & Tandoc, 2018). Consequently,

prevailing notions of journalistic engagement are driven at least as much by instrumental and economic motivations as by journalistic goals (Nelson & Schmidt, 2022).

To differentiate instrumental from intrinsic engagement, the concept can be distinguished into reception-oriented 'audience engagement' and production-oriented 'engaged journalism'. Audience engagement refers to market-driven practices that measure audiences' interactions with news and use these insights to increase news consumption—and, consequently, both advertising and subscription revenue. Engaged journalism, by contrast, involves direct interaction with audience members, incorporating them into news production processes and potentially empowering them as democratic participants (Nelson, 2021; Nelson & Schmidt, 2022). Despite these fundamental differences, both perspectives share a normative belief that journalists can no longer report as detached observers but should embrace their subjective affinities and remain responsive to the diverse interests of their audiences (Ferrucci et al., 2020; Groot Kormelink & Costera Meijer, 2015).

4 Methodological Framework

4.1 Futures studies as a realist-pragmatist research field

Futures studies is commonly divided into three methodological paradigms. The first comprises predictive approaches; the second brings forth the imaginative generation of alternative futures; and the third encompasses the critical and post-structural strands of futures studies (Kurki, 2020). The predictive paradigm emphasises quantifiable trends and produces calculative-probabilistic predictions through methods such as statistical analyses (Minkkinen, 2020a). The second paradigm, which Inayatullah (1990) conceptualised as cultural-interpretative futures studies, focuses on visionary thinking through scenarios, which assume many possible futures that cannot be linearly extrapolated from present trends. Instead of prediction, research within this paradigm imaginatively explores potential futures and creatively interprets empirical data to avoid deterministic projections (Minkkinen, 2020a). The third paradigm, critical futures studies, examines how futures are socio-materially constructed and circulated within present social realities and power relations (Hideg, 2002). The critical paradigm is differentiated from the first two and aligns more closely with traditional social sciences (Slaughter, 1998). As the methodological approach adopted in this study, the critical paradigm is discussed in more detail in section 4.2.

Excluding critical approaches, studies on alternative futures typically support decision-making and strategic planning (Habegger, 2010). When fulfilling this practical role, as addressed in section 2.1, futures scholars typically adhere to realist and utilitarian epistemologies and ontologies (Bell, 2003). This orientation is evident in both the calculative-probabilistic and cultural-interpretative futures paradigms (Karlsen et al., 2010). Both paradigms support planning by mapping and articulating probable, possible, and preferable futures that decision-makers can prepare for. The two are often intertwined and used complementarily (Ahmadi et al., 2016): calculative-probabilistic approaches collect and analyse data from the operational environment, which then informs cultural-interpretative discussions aimed at stimulating imaginative interpretations and visionary thinking about the empirical findings (Minkkinen, 2020a).

Reflecting its prevailing realist-pragmatist orientation, futures studies is often characterised as a method-centric discipline (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). According to Karlsen et al. (2010), foresight practitioners tend to focus on methods 'almost as an end in themselves' (p. 59). This implies the assumption that the rigorous deployment of methods as such produces reliable, although uncertain, knowledge of possible futures (Karlsen et al., 2010). In line with this realist epistemology, futures methods primarily serve utilitarian purposes. The core futures methods—such as environmental scanning, scenarios, Delphi surveys and futures workshops—all aim at enhancing decision-making by expanding strategic thinking into alternative futures. As with realist epistemologies, the practical-utilitarian orientation of these methods often relegates socio-theoretical considerations to a secondary role (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). Even the post-structuralist futures method, causal layered analysis (CLA), is designed with decision-makers in mind. Its deconstruction of dominant conceptions seeks to renew decision-makers' entrenched views and support their preparation for changes in their operational environments (Inayatullah, 1998).

As foresight and futures thinking have become integral to planning and decision-making in contemporary societies, critical analyses of their outcomes have become increasingly relevant (Karlsen et al., 2010). Yet, critical inquiries into foresight processes and the futures knowledge they produce remain comparatively rare. In fact, conceptions of futures may have become even more oriented towards pragmatic ends due to the professionalisation of the futures field and the widespread integration of futures methods across private, public and non-governmental organisations (Andersson, 2012, 2018; Rohrbeck & Schwarz, 2013). Slaughter (2016) observed a similar trend in academic publishing: pragmatic-utilitarian foresight on science, technology, economy and strategy has become more common, whereas expressions of critical and civilisational futures perspectives have declined.

4.2 Critical futures studies

Approaches that involve socio-theoretical analysis of present futures belong to critical futures studies (Goode & Godhe, 2017). Critical futurists contend that projected and imagined futures have become too significant to be entrusted solely to closed circles of futures experts. Instead, they argue that possible futures and their anticipation should be subjected to broad democratic and academic debate (Hideg, 2002). Whereas realist futures experts make extrapolative claims about futures, critical scholars critically scrutinise these anticipatory claims and the socio-cultural, political, economic and institutional contexts in which they are produced (Riedy, 2021). Similar to critical social theory, critical futures studies examines the discourses, myths, worldviews, material conditions and power relations that shape

shared views of possible futures (Inayatullah, 1998). With the proliferation of futures knowledge, critical perspectives are increasingly needed to cultivate a mature, responsible, credible and societally relevant futures field. Through critical inquiry, futures studies can also contribute to enhancing the quality of broader public discourse about futures (Slaughter, 1998).

For critical futures scholars, realist approaches often appear inadequate because they fail to acknowledge that language does not merely describe reality but actively shapes it (Inayatullah, 1998). From a critical standpoint, the identification and interpretation of futures-relevant phenomena are not neutral observations of an external reality but are embedded in social processes of collective sense-making about futures (Pouru et al., 2019; Rossel, 2012). Discourses, socio-cognitive schemas, shared meanings and material contexts all influence what data are gathered and how empirical phenomena are perceived, interpreted and projected into the future (Slaughter, 1998).

Moreover, realist perspectives tend to overemphasise the continuation of present trends, thus resulting in linear extrapolations that downplay normative action or other unexpected discontinuities that challenge current trajectories (Quist & Vergragt, 2006). This realist bias towards the tangible and the directly observable is evident in the frequent association of the future with technological development. Critical futurists remind us that technology cannot be understood as an independent driver of change because it is inseparable from the social. New technologies do not simply emerge from value-neutral research and development but are shaped by complex, interconnected social processes, such as regulation, funding, market demand, technological visions, cultural values and social discourse (Jørgensen et al., 2009). As Slaughter (1998) asserted, the development and use of technologies are 'cultural processes embodying specific ideological and social interests' (p. 377). It is these cultural and ideological dimensions of human reality that realist perspectives struggle to capture: 'The most notable features of technologies are often invisible and intangible (which is why they are overlooked by empiricist approaches)' (p. 377).

A central social dimension of foresight and anticipation is the shared assessments of what futures count as plausible or implausible. Realist futures scholars maintain that projections must be plausible by not contradicting established facts (Malaska, 2017). Critical futurists, however, stress that plausibility is not merely a matter of empirical verification but also a process of social validation and legitimation. What is deemed plausible often mirrors prevailing and normalised perceptions of the current socio-historical context (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). The plausibility of a future is determined by present conditions, knowledge and discussions; it is constructed intersubjectively in coherence with prior knowledge, shared meanings and normative underpinnings (Virmajoki, 2022). These perceptions draw on both the

everyday common sense and the underlying worldviews, myths and social imaginaries through which people make sense of the world (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021; Inayatullah, 1998). As socio-material conditions and public debate evolve, so do the boundaries of plausibility. In this sense, plausible futures are overdetermined by the present.

Fischer and Dannenberg (2021) proposed perceived plausibility as a focal point for critical futures inquiries. According to this approach, plausibility serves as an indicator of taken-for-granted anticipatory assumptions rather than as a measure of objectively verifiable claims. The task for critical futures, then, is to interrogate these assumptions and make explicit what is left unquestioned (Fischer & Dannenberg, 2021). One could articulate, for instance, a plausible expectation that journalism will be increasingly participatory (Kreiss & Brennen, 2016): numerous empirical indicators—from news shared on social media to interactions between journalists and news users—suggest increasing audience participation in news production and distribution. However, these observations offer little insight into what participation actually entails (Vos & Thomas, 2023). Through what practices does it occur? Who are the participating users, and what are their socio-economic backgrounds? What role do third-party algorithms play in shaping it? Whose interests does it serve? Probing these and related questions would offer a nuanced understanding of journalism's purportedly audience-centric futures and their internal paradoxes, rather than simply assuming increased participation by observing empirical indicators.

4.3 Pioneer analysis

To critically analyse journalism's futures, the thesis applies pioneer analysis focused on entrepreneurial journalists and thought leaders within the journalistic field. As a futures method, pioneer analysis anticipates change by investigating trailblazing actors (Heinonen, 2017). Pioneers are defined as creative, autonomous and future-oriented actors who identify early signs of change, experiment with new ideas and practices that harness these changes and thereby open new development paths—and, consequently, alternative futures—in their fields (Heinonen & Karjalainen, 2019).

Drawing on the framework by Geels and Schot (2007), pioneer analysis assumes that transformations in a system, such as journalism, originate with marginal niche actors operating at the system's edges. Comparatively free from the pressures of immediate market competition and dominant regime expectations, such actors are more open to experimentation and reimagining the futures of their field. When their innovative practices, products and ideas establish compelling narratives of desirable futures, address industry-wide problems and align with broader socio-economic and cultural shifts, they can trigger and catalyse processes that gradually transform the

system's established regime (Geels & Schot, 2007). Studying pioneers is thus expected to provide valuable insight into how a field or industry might evolve and respond to its emerging challenges (Heinonen & Karjalainen, 2019).

Pioneer analyses have conventionally followed realist and instrumental epistemologies and treated pioneers' ideas, practices and innovations as factual indicators of emerging, potentially exploitable trends (Hiltunen, 2008). This thesis develops pioneer analysis in a critical direction by examining the cultural and socio-material foundations of pioneers' creative agency. As Heinonen and Karjalainen (2019) noted, such an approach 'aims to provide insights about the nature, conditions and implications of pioneering' (p. 62). In this spirit, this study explored how pioneer journalists' forward-looking ideas and their enactment are constituted in relation to other actors and the surrounding media landscape.

Following the methodology of critical futures studies, the thesis examines the discourses, imaginaries, expectations and power relations that shape pioneer journalists' agency (see Inayatullah, 1998). Drawing on a relational ontology (see section 2.4.1), pioneers are not conceptualised as independent, heroic and entrepreneurial individuals but as dependent on and enabled by their socio-material contexts (Fuller & Warren, 2006). It is these relationships—rather than individual ingenuity—that generate the 'new' they come to represent. Hepp and Loosen (2019), for instance, discussed pioneer communities and networks as concrete sites where pioneering is co-constructed.

The thesis analyses pioneer journalists to better understand the 'new' that is emerging in the journalistic field—though not necessarily as innovations with immediate or potential practical, economic or journalistic benefit. Instead, investigating novelty-seeking pioneers enables a critical exploration of the normative and material forces that are reshaping journalism in novel and even transformative directions. Like any actors developing and promoting new initiatives, pioneer journalists draw on and reformulate existing ideas by relying on past-based schemas to ensure that the futures they experiment with appear plausible. Therefore, in addition to future-oriented and imaginative projectivity, pioneer journalists' agency is constituted by past-based iterations of established routines and cultural schemas—both within and beyond the journalistic field—as well as by a practical evaluation of emerging norms and routines in relation to the contemporary moment's needs, expectations and contingencies (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; see section 2.4.1). These dimensions of pioneer journalists' agency are addressed both in the thesis' articles and in the synthesis of findings presented in section 6.

4.4 Research design

The selection of data and methods in the individual studies of the thesis was designed to explore how pioneer journalists shape the 'present futures' of journalism (Adam & Groves, 2007; Fuller & Loogma, 2009). Adam and Groves (2007) described present futures as

> approaches to the future from the standpoint of the present through which we seek to predict, transform and control the future for the benefit of the present. It projects the future as a terrain that is *empty*, open and subject to colonization. (p. 200, emphasis in the original)

Three takeaways from this definition are particularly relevant to the research design of this study. First, the perspective of present futures highlights that conceptions of the future are firmly rooted in present contexts. Second, it underscores that futures knowledge is produced in the service of present-day interests as actors seek to shape the future in ways that benefit them. Third, it challenges the idea of the future as an empty space that is open to wholesale redesign. Instead, it suggests that futures are already partially shaped by historical and material continuities, such as routinised behaviours, infrastructures and power relations. A critical study of present futures, therefore, requires a research design that enables the analysis of current contexts and standpoints, the interests embedded in futures projections, and the existing complexities and conditions that shape, enable and constrain future expectations and their realisation.

To examine the present futures of journalism and the media landscape in which they are embedded, this study adopted a research strategy proposed by Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015). The strategy outlines three interconnected pathways for critical, socio-theoretical futures studies: conceiving 'practices' as projective agency, focusing on the relational 'dialectics' of distinct socio-material forces and understanding 'social imaginaries' as the broader symbolic and imaginative backdrop that imbues present futures with collective meaning (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). Together, the three pathways constitute a present-focused research design for approaching emerging futures. 'Socio-technical practices' cover the performative, actual making of futures through new journalistic routines, 'future-oriented dialectics' consider the socio-material relationships in which these practices are shaped and reshaped and 'social imaginaries' focus on the shared meanings and aspirations that underlie the practices and their socio-material relationships. In what follows, these pathways are described in detail, and their implementation in the thesis's articles is explained.

1) *The construction of futures through socio-technical practices*. In this socio-theoretical pathway, futures are seen as created through relational socio-technical practices. According to Ahlqvist and Rhisiart (2015), 'the key idea is to understand the future as it emerges through the interactions of socio-technical networks, that is, human, organisations, gadgets, and infrastructures' (p. 98). Because practices are mediated by technologies, analysing the underlying values and normative assumptions that guide their use is essential for understanding the construction of futures. In this thesis, pioneer journalists' socio-technical practices are examined in relation to digital-media technologies, their normative imaginaries and current trends. This contextualisation helps explain how pioneers' expectations and practices become performative and may gain broader traction (Brown & Michael, 2003).

   Socio-technical journalistic practices are examined in three of the thesis's articles. Article I touches upon pioneer journalists' self-described practices in addition to its focus on their imaginaries of journalism's futures. These practices are analysed in relation to the broader digital-media environment, its contemporary challenges and its normative imaginaries.

   Article IV analyses textual practices—understood as distinct styles of journalistic storytelling—as they appear in the daily news of entrepreneurial journalism outlets. The identified textual practices are analysed in relation to the surrounding hybrid media system, where different actors and registers of expression are intertwined. Article V explores live journalism, or news-on-stage, as an emerging journalistic form. Here, the examined technology is the theatre as a journalistic medium. The article discusses how 'anti-digital' live journalism responds to perceived challenges in digital media and draws on audiences' affective engagement with media content.

2) *Future-oriented dialectics*. This approach focuses on the collisions and convergences of opposing cultural, economic, political or technological trajectories in the present by examining how and what alternative futures may emerge from their interplay (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015).

   Articles II, III and IV investigate changes in journalism through the mutual influence of the competing journalistic ideals of objectivity and dialogue (Soffer, 2009). These three articles explore the hybrid forms of journalism that emerge from the interaction of these ideals in the digital-media environment. In addition to the three articles on hybrid journalism, article I discusses the potential collisions between journalistic norms and 'peer-to-peer/peer production' as a constitutive social imaginary of the

technological field (see Kreiss et al., 2011). Finally, article V conceptualises live journalism as a new form of journalistic storytelling that is shaped through the entanglements of journalists, live audiences, theatre setting and novel conceptions of journalistic storytelling. Here, dialectics unfold between journalistic norms and 'eudaimonic entertainment', which centres on delivering a sense of meaningfulness through media content.

3) *Social imaginaries in the construction of futures*. In the third socio-theoretical pathway, present futures are conceptualised through social imaginaries. This perspective highlights the normative notions, symbols, meanings, affects and aspirations that underpin social life (Patomäki & Steger, 2010). Both the present social reality and its anticipated futures are always perceived within a complex and mostly unconscious background of symbolic framings. Socio-theoretical futures studies examine these 'key systemic abstractions that govern, or at least channel, much of the thinking about future alternatives' (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015, p. 102).

   The concept of social imaginaries is applied in article I to situate pioneer journalists' expectations within the social imaginaries of the technological field. While not explicitly referencing social imaginaries, article II employs discourse analysis to construct scenario prototypes which, like imaginaries, help unveil the normative and semiotic frameworks that underpin pioneer journalists' imagined futures.

To analyse these three dimensions, the study employed methodologies from the social sciences. 'About Us' pages were analysed via discourse analysis, while interviews, live journalism manuscripts and Nieman Lab predictions were analysed through an inductive-abductive identification of thematic categories. Daily news articles were analysed using appraisal analysis, which is a socio-linguistic method that is used to identify dialogic, conversational and intertextual elements in news and other texts (Martin & White, 2005). Regarding futures methods, the discourses identified in the 'About Us' pages were expanded into scenario sketches of journalism in 2030, and the Nieman Lab predictions were categorised into perceived emerging trends in journalism. In the synthesis of this thesis, these conceptions and practices are interpreted as manifestations of pioneer journalists' futures knowledge (Pouru et al., 2019).

5 Main Findings

This section summarises the findings of the thesis articles as outlined in Table 1. In the table, pioneer journalists' forward-looking perspectives in articles I–III are encapsulated as their futures knowledge—that is, their ideas about how journalism should be practised in the digital-media environment and their anticipations of what the futures of journalism might entail. Articles IV and V then illustrate how these perceptions and expectations can be enacted in journalistic work.

Table 1. Overview of the thesis articles: Futures knowledge and its enactment in journalistic practices.

Articles on norms and conceptions	**Data and method**	**Findings: Futures knowledge**
Article I	**Data**: Semi-structured interviews with Finnish entrepreneurial journalists **Method**: Inductive-abductive thematic categorisation	**Core expectations** • Journalism is shaped by cultural diversification, social fragmentation and political polarisation • Algorithmic logics threaten journalistic quality; journalists distance themselves from social-media platforms in response • Journalism is co-produced with technology-enabled news users to cater to their needs and preferences • Editorial independence is redefined as journalists' personal autonomy and self-expression • Journalists' thematic interests and expertise foster communities of shared interest around journalistic content • There is a growing emphasis on specialised niche journalism funded by subscriptions
Article II	**Data**: 'About Us' pages of entrepreneurial journalism outlets **Method**: Discourse analysis	**Four discourses on journalism futures** • Identity discourse: News outlets portray themselves as human-like personas with distinct identities • Niche discourse: News outlets specialise in distinct topics and amplify diverse voices around those topics • Network discourse: The production of journalism is framed as a collaborative effort involving audiences, journalists, news outlets and non-news organisations • Change discourse: News outlets are positioned as reformers of journalism and society at large
Article III	**Data**: Nieman Lab annual 'predictions' on the futures of journalism **Method**: Inductive thematic categorisation	**Core expectations** • Journalism will diversify to cover a broader range of interests, perspectives and voices • Journalists and audience members will cultivate increasingly intimate relationships • Journalists will develop expertise in niche topics to attract audience-based revenue • Even as digital platforms enhance democratic participation, they also raise concerns about information inequality and the dissemination of false information
Articles on practices	**Data and method**	**Findings: Future-oriented journalistic practices**
Article IV	**Data**: Daily news of entrepreneurial news outlets **Method**: Appraisal analysis	• Journalists use appraisals in daily news coverage to contextualise, analyse, interpret and explain daily news rather than 'just' report it • Journalists use vernacular language to establish a distinct voice and personality that reflect the identity of the news outlet and its journalists • Appraisals and informal language are employed to foster an intimate and aesthetically co-oriented relationship with niche audiences
Article V	**Data**: On-stage live journalism manuscripts **Method**: Thematic categorisation according to the dimensions of eudaimonic media	• Journalism engages audiences by offering a sense of meaning and purpose through news stories • This can occur through eudaimonic media content, which aims to provide contemplative, meaningful and affectively complex experiences • Eudaimonic news stories delve into existential questions by portraying individuals as part of something greater than themselves • Media communities can also cultivate eudaimonic experiences as exemplified by in-person live journalism events

5.1 Article I

Ruotsalainen, J., Heinonen, S., Hujanen, J. & Villi, M. (2021). Pioneers as peers: How entrepreneurial journalists imagine the futures of journalism. *Digital Journalism*, *11*(6), 1045–1064.
https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1996252

By examining semi-structured interviews with 11 Finnish entrepreneurial journalists, article I constructed a social imaginary that encapsulated their views on journalism and its futures. The imaginary was structured around three dimensions. In the first dimension, the journalists argued that digital technologies have empowered intrinsically motivated, active audiences who use digital media to seek information aligned with their interests, tastes and preferences and to participate in communities built around these affinities. In the journalists' view, the structures and affordances of digital media push news towards serving niche audiences, thus making users' needs and preferences a central organising principle of digital journalism. In this model, the appeal of news extends beyond delivering accurate, timely information to fostering shared insights, sensibilities and affects between journalists and audiences.

In the second dimension of the imaginary, the journalists redefined journalistic autonomy as professional self-expression by complementing the conventional view of editorial autonomy as independence from outside influence. Just as they viewed audiences as curious and engaged news users, the journalists saw themselves—and future journalists—as intrinsically motivated professionals who cultivate distinctive expertise and approaches to journalism. In both cases, this person-centric orientation was seen to arise from digital affordances and cultural logics in contemporary media environments.

In the third dimension, the journalists who were interviewed emphasised subscriptions and other audience payments as essential to sustainable revenue models and digital news production. They associated audience-driven business models with dialogic practices and news formats and stressed that coverage is increasingly informed by interactions with audience members. To incentivise people to pay, they argued, journalists must deliver distinctive journalism that meets specific, underserved needs and cultural tastes. They also expected that a journalist's individual identity—expressed through personal expertise and style—would help drive subscriptions by strengthening the communal, interest-based bonds between journalists and their audiences.

The journalists contextualised these dimensions within developments in the broader media landscape. They expected a further decline in the overall quality of online media content driven by prevailing algorithmic logics and the faltering of advertising-based business models. These strategies, they contended, prioritise

maximising audience reach at the expense of journalistic quality and integrity while elevating popularity and speed as the dominant news values that guide editorial decisions. They also expected the media environment to be increasingly defined by cultural diversification, social fragmentation and political polarisation. In this context, they anticipated a continued erosion of audiences' interest and trust in 'centrist' legacy journalism. The journalists argued that these two trends pose an existential threat to news by creating a downward spiral in which declining quality and eroding trust reinforce one another. To counter this, they advocated for disengaging from prevailing algorithmic logics and advertising-based business models in favour of cultivating direct audience relationships, strengthening editorial independence and diversifying the voices and issues represented in journalism.

Because the journalists anchored their anticipations in the affordances of digital technologies and in a cultural climate shaped by digital media, the analysis traced their views back to core imaginaries or 'utopian orthodoxies' (Kreiss et al., 2011) of the technological field (see section 6.5 for broader discussion). Together, these imaginaries provided the broader cultural and normative framework that legitimised the journalists' digital-first approaches and their economic implementation. While providing legitimation and a sense of authentic digital sensibility, this alignment also illustrates the power of the technological field to frame and shape collective expectations about journalism's futures, which may hinder the development of genuinely novel visions for journalism. Not only does this constrain the futures imagination within journalism but it also exposes the field to the very criticisms directed at the technological imaginaries (see section 6 for discussion on these criticisms).

5.2 Article II

Ruotsalainen, J., & Villi, M. (2018). Hybrid engagement: Discourses and scenarios of entrepreneurial journalism. *Media and Communication*, *6*(4), 79–90. https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v6i4.1465

Article II investigated the journalistic conceptions, norms and ideals articulated by digital news outlets on their 'About Us' pages. Unlike the individual journalists examined in article I, these pages function as mission statements that outline the outlets' aspirations, critiques of existing journalistic practices and allegedly innovative approaches to journalism. The sample included a total of 41 entrepreneurial journalism outlets from Canada, Cuba, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland, Spain, Sweden and the United States. 'About Us' pages are relevant for pioneer analysis because they provide new entrants a platform to 'idealize what they would like to change about journalism, and how they might

imagine—and ultimately invent—new models and new practices' (Carlson & Usher, 2016, p. 575). The 'About Us' pages, in other words, offer insight into pioneer journalists' public, communication-oriented views about journalism and its futures. In this regard, they are an important site where expectations about journalism are articulated and disseminated.

The journalistic conceptions and visions identified in the 'About Us' pages were interpreted as hybrids of journalism's two constitutive ideals: objectivity and dialogue (Soffer, 2009). The outlets claimed to uphold core journalistic principles—such as factual, balanced and rigorous reporting that embodies the objectivity ideal—while simultaneously emphasising the dialogic, intersubjective dimensions of digital news. The deployment of these two constitutive yet competing and mutually contradictory ideals was interpreted as a strategy to retain both the interest and trust of audiences by fostering engagement through dialogic practices in line with participatory online culture while preserving the authority of professional journalism through factual reporting. The article conceptualised this approach as hybrid engagement, which appeals both to reason (via factual information) and to affect (via personal, emotional connection with news content).

To better understand the outlets' sense-making of trends and developments in digital journalism, the 'About Us' pages were analysed to identify recurring discourses that situated their conceptions and expectations within the broader cultural and normative frameworks of digital media. Four discourses were identified: identity, niche, network and change discourses. The identity discourse presented media outlets as human-like personas with distinct identities and a passionate commitment to their distinctive journalism. The companies supported their identities by identifying with their audiences and highlighting the personal voices of their journalists.

In the niche discourse, specialisation in particular subject areas was framed as a practice that facilitates comprehensive, deeply contextualised journalism. Beyond specific topics, 'niche' also referred to the allegedly unique journalistic voices and approaches adopted by the outlets. The network discourse portrayed the outlets as nodes in digital networks of media production. Within this discourse, journalism was described as a distributed process that involves audience members, freelancers, other media outlets and non-news organisations. In the network discourse, the outlets sought a communal relationship with audience members who shared their tastes and interests.

The change discourse presented digital news outlets as reformers of media, journalism and society at large. Traditional journalism was criticised for failing to hold the powerful to account, avoiding interaction with audiences and producing journalism that is dull, uniform and disengaging. In contrast, more heterogeneous

and captivating journalism was seen as key to catalysing social change, encouraging public participation and rekindling audiences' interest in the news.

The outlets contextualised their mission statements within an online media environment saturated with news and commentary. They argued that it has become increasingly difficult for online audiences to discern what is relevant or true amid the digital noise and to navigate competing perspectives and sources of information. Despite this abundance, they viewed contemporary media as plagued by uniformity, lack of diversity, and declining quality. Their proposed remedy, as outlined in the four discourses, was to specialise news production while upholding core journalistic standards.

For these outlets, specialisation took two forms. The first involved developing new journalistic forms and formats tailored to online media. Instead of adding to the content glut, they promised insightful analyses and explainers designed to help audiences better understand the news, their contexts and the issues involved. The second centred on specialising in specific topics. In doing so, these online-only news outlets claimed to meet unmet demand and contribute to a more diverse media landscape.

The identified discourses were developed into four scenario sketches depicting alternative futures for entrepreneurial journalism. Each scenario outlined a distinct strategy for maintaining and enhancing the relevance of news in digital societies, with potential value for both legacy media and emerging news outlets. In the first scenario, 'Elitist-Individualists', journalism increasingly targeted educated elite audiences while resisting audience contributions and engagement with narrow identities and interests. The second scenario, 'Communalists', envisioned journalist-audience collaboration as both a news-production method and a source of shared meaning among participants.

In the third scenario, 'Identity Media', journalism doubled down on serving narrow identities by foregrounding the personal interests—or 'obsessions'—of both journalists and audience members. The fourth scenario sketch, 'Public Service', departed from the previous sketches by advocating for journalism rooted in the normative ideals of the profession, with a focus on matters of public interest—yet delivered in new formats, such as news explainers.

While these approaches may seem like sound strategies for digital journalism, they carry problematic implications for journalism's role within democratic societies—except for the fourth scenario, 'Public Service'. The article discussed the possibility that a focus on niche audiences could also be adopted by legacy media, thereby in effect eroding the shared public sphere and undermining informed democratic participation. This potential outcome exemplifies how pioneer journalists' approaches, if widely adopted beyond a small group of pioneers, could have severe and unintended repercussions for public-interest journalism.

5.3 Article III

Ruotsalainen, J. (2018). Scanning the shape of journalism—Emerging trends, changing culture? *Futures*, *104*, 14–24.
https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2018.06.011

Article III examined futures knowledge in the journalistic field by analysing the annual journalism predictions published by the Nieman Lab at Harvard University. As a futures-focused research outlet and an influential trade publication, Nieman Lab is a central institutional actor in the discourse about journalism's futures (Lowrey & Shan, 2018). Each year, it gathers insights from approximately 200 pioneer journalists and journalism experts worldwide regarding their expectations for journalism's evolution in the upcoming year. Although the predictions nominally focus on a one-year timeframe, they typically reflect longer-term trends and address futures that extend beyond any specific calendar year.

In the article, anticipations from 2017 were collected and categorised thematically. The analysis yielded eight thematic trends that encompassed the individual predictions. For comparative purposes, the article also presented findings from a 2014 futures workshop and interview process that involved Finnish journalists and communications professionals. Because this process addressed the futures of media more generally and included participants beyond journalism professionals, these results were excluded from this overview.

The eight journalism trends and related expectations identified in the Nieman Lab data are described below.

1) *Journalism diversifies.* New digital formats and social-media platforms are enabling a broader spectrum of journalistic voices and perspectives while catering to focused knowledge interests and underserved audience segments. This diversification is expected to accelerate with the integration of AI in news personalisation by allowing increasingly accurate and detailed audience targeting. Such diversified news is also linked to the rise of informal, conversational and personal news styles.
2) *Post-truth is addressed yet persists.* In decentralised digital media, conflicting information proliferates, users selectively consume preferred news sources, and malign actors readily spread false information. As a result, the condition known as 'post-truth' endures, which is characterised by widespread dissemination of mis- and disinformation, erosion of commonly accepted facts and declining trust in traditional news media. To restore trust, news outlets engage audiences in the production of news and cultivate a more open, self-critical journalistic culture.

3) *More collaboration and blurring of boundaries*. News outlets increasingly collaborate with each other, audience members and other stakeholders. These partnerships are expected to enhance the quality of journalism and increase its social impact and relevance. Meanwhile, the boundaries between journalism and other industries, especially the tech industry, are becoming increasingly blurred. The Commons—openly shared information resources—and the collective intelligence of users are expected to play an ever more prominent role in journalism.

4) *Subscriptions and memberships replace advertising.* Facing declining advertising revenues, news organisations are facilitating direct audience income by producing high-quality niche content tailored to potential subscribers. However, this shift towards audience-centric business models, and the types of journalism it encourages, risk making journalism more exclusive and elitist.

5) *Platforms solidify their role in news distribution*. Journalists are expected to leverage the network effects of social platforms to produce and distribute news in spontaneous collaboration with digital publics. This enables civil society to participate more actively in public debate and influence the news agenda. At the same time, the expanding power of platform companies is becoming increasingly apparent. In response, dissatisfied users may migrate to smaller, more exclusive social platforms.

6) *Quality over quantity.* News organisations prioritise high-quality journalistic content as a key response to their current challenges. Central strategies include allocating resources to specific beats instead of a general news service, working with committed and engaged audiences and producing in-depth coverage and analyses that help navigate an increasingly complex news environment.

7) *AI in journalism*. Rather than replacing journalists, AI is expected to support and augment their work. Promising applications include news personalisation, fact-checking, data analysis and natural-language processing. A growing divide may develop between AI-literate journalists who incorporate these tools into their workflows and those who continue to rely on traditional journalistic routines.

8) *Journalists and audiences get closer*. Driven by audience-centric business models and interactive digital media, journalists are undergoing a normative shift from detached autonomy towards engaged involvement and community building. News users subscribe to news outlets they feel connected to, thereby prompting journalists to adopt practices that respond to these needs.

The first trend, journalism diversifies, deserves special attention because it constitutes the largest category of expectations in the Nieman Lab predictions and is a prominent theme in articles I and II. The Nieman Lab contributors viewed diversification as a deterministic technological tendency in online media. They argued that digital platforms and applications lower the barriers for journalistic entrants and enable new forms, formats and distribution channels, thus leading to greater diversity in voices, topics and perspectives. Consistent with articles I and II, the Nieman Lab predictions mainly associated journalistic diversity with serving specific information interests and audience groups as well as amplifying journalists' personal voices. To counter concerns that the growth of clickbait content—a consequence of algorithmic news distribution—undermines journalistic quality and diversity, the Nieman Lab experts highlighted the potential of emerging platforms to mitigate the diversity issues associated with the dominant social-media networks.

Taken together, the Nieman Lab anticipations reflected similar dynamics to those identified in articles I and II: a decentralised digital-media landscape, a closer, more dialogic and reciprocal relationship between journalists and audience members, a focus on niche topics and segmented audiences and an assumed net-positive influence of digital technologies on democratic participation and pluralistic public discourse. While some contributors raised concerns about increasing information inequality, algorithmic power in gatekeeping information and shaping social reality, and the increasingly chaotic, decentralised information environment, the overall tone remained optimistic. By and large, the Nieman Lab contributors adhered to the normative ideals of digital culture: they emphasised serving individual user needs, viewed networked communities as the core social units of digital society and regarded these developments as emancipatory forces—often without fully addressing their broader social and societal implications.

5.4 Article IV

Ruotsalainen, J., Hujanen, J., & Villi, M. (2019). A future of journalism beyond the objectivity-dialogue divide? Hybridity in the news of entrepreneurial journalists. *Journalism*, *22*(9), 2240–2258.
https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884919867216

Whereas article II analysed the norm of dialogue as expressed in entrepreneurial news outlets' 'About Us' pages, article IV shifted the focus to actual dialogic practice in news reporting. 'Hard news'—daily coverage of recent events in politics, the economy and other substantive beats—was chosen as the object of analysis because it conventionally avoids dialogic elements (Raeijmaekers & Maeseele,

2017). Therefore, the presence of journalistic dialogue in such news may indicate the emergence of new reporting styles and practices. The primary data were gathered from the daily news of five entrepreneurial journalism outlets: *Axios*, *MustRead*, *National Observer*, *The Skimm* and the *Voice of San Diego*. For comparative purposes, a second dataset was collected from three legacy media organisations: *The Associated Press*, *Helsingin Sanomat* and *The New York Times.*

Instead of actual interactions, the article examined dialogue as distinct textual styles and language registers—the ways in which journalists use language to evoke a sense of conversation with the reader and to situate news within broader societal discussions. By applying appraisal theory, the article defined dialogic styles and registers as journalists' evaluative expressions about events, issues and characters alongside their use of vernacular registers of informal conversations (Marchionni, 2013; Martin & White, 2005). Appraisals and vernacular expressions are dialogic because they position news texts within imagined conversations in which participants convey and reflect their views, subjectivities and social contexts (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013). Dialogic news language is thus interpersonal and affective, which contrasts with the impersonal and emotionally detached tone of conventional news reporting anchored in the objectivity norm (Baym, 2017; Martin & White, 2005; Soffer, 2009).

The entrepreneurial news outlets employed appraisals and vernacular registers prominently and systematically, whereas the sampled legacy media organisations used them only occasionally. The article identified two core functions of the dialogic style adopted by the entrepreneurial journalists. First, rather than expressing opinions or strong normative judgements, they used appraisals to contextualise, analyse, interpret and explain the news. Reflecting dialogic ideals, these interpretations and evaluations foregrounded diverse perspectives on news events rather than presented a singular, 'objective' account.

Second, vernacular language contributed to distinct, person-like editorial voices. The news articles were informal, inviting and engaging in tone. They created the impression of a journalist personally telling the news to an audience. This stylistic approach was interpreted as an attempt to catalyse intimacy, rapport and aesthetic co-orientation between journalists and audiences as well as among audience members.

These dialogic styles positioned the news as a socially shared, affective and discursive arena. Dialogic language, therefore, surfaced as a central practice through which the pioneers enacted their expectation of a more communal, personal and affectual journalism. The article contextualised dialogic news within a hybrid media system of traditional and nontraditional producers, where a detached voice is no longer a self-evident marker of 'serious' journalism. Accordingly, the examined news outlets were perceived as pioneers in a conversational and evaluative delivery

of 'hard' news that aims to address audiences in their specific social contexts and to improve the sensemaking capabilities of the news format and journalistic storytelling.

Article IV illustrated how journalism's segmentation around specific interests and audience groups, as discussed in all previous articles, can extend to news language—for instance, by reflecting the dialects and vernaculars of an outlet's target audience. This entails two core insights. First, it suggests a strategy in which stronger bonds between news providers and their audiences are pursued through colloquial and affective news language. As a drawback, such language can alienate those who do not belong to the target audience segment. Second, a dialogic news language can blur the boundaries between journalism and other fields by adopting the communicative styles and vocabularies of specific groups, such as decision-makers. While this boundary-blurring may enhance journalism's relevance within specialised communities, it also risks undermining editorial independence and compromising journalists' role as critical observers.

5.5 Article V

Ruotsalainen, J., & Villi, M. (2021). 'A shared reality between a journalist and the audience': How live journalism reimagines news stories. *Media and Communication*, *9*(2), 167–177.
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v9i2.3809

Article V explored the emerging news format and storytelling practice of live journalism. The main data consisted of manuscripts of live journalism performances, in which journalists presented their news stories to a live audience on a theatre stage or similar venue. To better understand the journalistic conceptions behind the stories, the authors also observed rehearsals of the shows. The article focused on *Musta laatikko* (*Black Box*), a live journalism production by the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. *Musta laatikko* serves as an example of pioneering intrapreneurial journalists within legacy media as such on-stage live journalism is still practised by only a few forerunners globally.

Like the pioneer journalists examined in the previous articles, the live journalists emphasised affectively engaging news presentations, cultivating interpersonal relationships with audience members, prioritising sensemaking over 'mere' reporting and delivering news through channels other than algorithmically organised social-media feeds. As one editor described it, the aim of a live journalism show is to create a 'shared reality between a journalist and the audience' (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2021, p. 171). To achieve this, editors encouraged journalists to draw on their

personality, enthusiasm and expertise to spark a subjective interest in the audience and immerse them in the story. By using theatre as the medium, they aimed to offer a focused, anti-algorithmic experience free from digital distractions.

Taken together, these approaches aimed to cultivate journalism that evokes a sense of meaningfulness in both journalists and audience members. The analysis of the manuscripts examined how live journalists seek to create such experiences through their stories. Drawing on recent research on 'meaningful media' (Oliver & Raney, 2011), the article conceptualised meaningfulness as eudaimonic media experiences. Eudaimonia refers to a deeper form of enjoyment in contrast to the hedonic kind: eudaimonic enjoyment can be attained through contemplative and affectively complex experiences, whereas hedonic enjoyment stems from simpler, more immediate gratification. Accordingly, eudaimonic media content addresses the purpose of life through shared meanings, values and moral reflection and reflects both the virtuous and tragic aspects of the human condition (Frischlich, 2021). By focusing on live journalism manuscripts, the article discussed whether and how eudaimonia could be applied beyond the live event to journalism more broadly. Besides practical applications, the article also considered the potential unintended consequences of eudaimonic journalism.

Following prior studies, the article examined eudaimonia as expressions of self-transcendence and the fulfilment of intrinsic needs in the manuscripts. Self-transcendence refers to experiences wherein people perceive themselves as part of something larger than themselves, such as nature or shared humanity (Oliver & Raney, 2011). The fulfilment of intrinsic needs, in turn, refers to the satisfaction of the core psychological needs of autonomy, competence and social relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The analysis found that the *Musta laatikko* manuscripts consistently employed descriptions of self-transcendence and the fulfilment of intrinsic needs. More specifically, the manuscripts enticed self-transcendence with descriptions of extended time (reflections on history and possible futures), life and death (contemplations of life as fleeting, finite and precious), democracy and public life (considering issues that transcend one's self-interest) and nature (descriptions of nature as a superior and awe-inspiring force).

Regarding intrinsic needs, the manuscripts addressed autonomy and competence by portraying independent and competent laypeople as well as the journalists themselves. Relatedness, in turn, was invoked by portrayals of warm, communal and supportive relationships among people. Under relatedness, the journalists also aimed to establish a personal connection with audience members by addressing them directly using pronouns such as 'you', 'us' and 'we'. This connection potentially extended beyond the live event by discursively including both the audience members and the journalist in a shared social, cultural and political reality. The article thus suggested that eudaimonia could be applied to journalism more broadly to bolster its

social dimensions—not only through journalistic content but also by building reciprocal, communal relationships between journalists and news users (see Tenenboim & Stroud, 2020). The article considered other live events as well as newsletters, direct messaging services (e.g. WhatsApp and Telegram) and closed social-media groups as potential platforms for cultivating such intimate journalist-audience relationships (e.g. Kligler-Vilenchik & Tenenboim, 2020).

In line with the previous articles, article V discussed journalists' pursuit of 'eudaimonic engagement' as a potential driver of audience segmentation and fragmentation. Eudaimonia is activated through a personal sense of meaningfulness and may be especially suited for journalism targeted at niche audiences and distributed via personalised channels, such as email newsletters (Ji et al., 2019). Moreover, the eudaimonic appeal of autonomy and competence is likely to resonate most with middle-class audiences seeking opportunities for self-reflection and self-improvement (Kreiss, 2018). Eudaimonic news could thus contribute to further fragmentation of news audiences and exacerbate socio-economic inequalities in news consumption (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018).

6 Synthesis of the Key Findings

This section summarises the core elements of the pioneer journalists' futures knowledge and the corresponding journalistic practices. In addition to their expectations, the synthesis outlines (1) the untapped potentials these journalists perceive in the present news media landscape and how they are renewing journalism in response, (2) the key challenges and shortcomings of contemporary journalism they identify and seek to address, (3) the normative imaginaries that underpin and give meaning to their practices, expectations, and imagined futures and (4) the potential problems and contradictions inherent in their journalistic model. These potentials, problems and solutions take shape within the socio-material context of digital media: its technological infrastructures, institutional arrangements and audience dynamics. It is within this broader context that pioneer journalists articulate and enact their expectations about how journalism may evolve in the future. This context also provides the conditions and dynamics through which their expectations, practices and imaginaries can gain traction and be adopted more widely across the news media.

6.1 Expectation: Distinguished journalism for diverse audiences

The pioneer journalists' expectations for the futures of journalism can be summarised as an anticipated shift from institutional towards more person-centric media. According to them, digitalisation has decentralised and diversified the media landscape by shifting power from legacy institutions to media users and digital news outlets. Because users often prefer interacting with other users rather than with brands, the journalists argued that news outlets should adopt more user-like identities instead of maintaining a strictly institutional presence. They emphasised the importance of a journalist's personality, interests and taste in crafting journalism and forging interpersonal relationships with an audience. Reflecting this pursuit, even the news outlets presented themselves as personalities with unique identities, as observed in article II.

The journalists viewed person- and audience-centricity as structural tendencies in the digital-media landscape. They attributed them to interactivity and

personalisation as defining technological features of digital media. Digital technologies allow users to seek information based on their interests, produce media content as a form of self-expression and collaborate with other users. These two affordances, therefore, position an idealised active user—whether a journalist or an audience member—as a key actor in digital media.

As journalists and news organisations adapt to these logics and dynamics, the pioneer journalists expected them to both preserve and renew their normative ideals and professional practices. On the one hand, they argued that journalism cannot survive if it compromises the professional norms, ethical guidelines and routines that distinguish it from other forms of media content. They repeatedly underlined core values, such as factuality, public significance, critical scrutiny of power and clear, concise delivery (see Deuze, 2005). Rather than loosening journalistic standards, they argued that these norms and routines should be reinforced to rebuild audience trust and foster engagement. The journalists often positioned themselves as torchbearers of traditional journalistic ideals by arguing that legacy news media have compromised these ideals by prioritising click-driven content that generates revenue but holds limited news value (see also Wagemans et al., 2016).

On the other hand, the journalists argued that while 'good old journalism' remains essential, it alone is insufficient to secure a sustainable future for the profession. To stay relevant in the crowded digital-media environment, they asserted, journalists must better leverage the digital affordances of interactivity and personalisation. This requires not only adopting new tools and platforms but also engaging more fully with the participatory digital culture and audience dynamics. According to the pioneer journalists, catering to interactive digital sensibilities requires, first, sustained, systematic and reciprocal interactions with audience members. As people routinely gather in virtual communities—such as through social media or messaging groups—journalists should embrace these dynamics and cultivate participatory communities around news content. They maintained that this approach would enhance trust and engagement while providing journalists valuable insights into news topics and audience needs. As a result, they expected the journalist-audience relationship to become increasingly interactive, reciprocal and intimate. Rather than serving a largely undifferentiated and passive mass audience, they anticipated journalism to evolve into a more community-driven practice that is co-produced with and funded by engaged news users.

Second, the journalists emphasised that journalism needs to adapt to online user behaviour shaped by personalisation through shared interests and affinities. They expected that tailoring news content, style and formats to specific interests and tastes—rather than providing a general and comprehensive news service—will become increasingly important to how news is produced and consumed. However, this does not entail simply catering to audience demand at the expense of editorial

autonomy. Instead, the journalists believed that online audiences will organically gravitate towards journalists they perceive as independent, knowledgeable and genuinely engaged with topics and concerns that resonate with their audience.

6.2 Enacting expectations in journalistic work

The pioneer journalists' news output and approaches to audience engagement enacted these normative expectations in practice. Reflecting their commitment to professional norms and routines, their work typically prioritised 'hard' news—such as original reporting, news analyses and investigative journalism—while lifestyle and other 'soft' genres played only a marginal role. To meet the expectation of enhanced audience interaction and participation, the journalists favoured direct communication channels, such as private social-media groups, email newsletters, proprietary platforms and on-site events. In these exchanges, participants could discuss news events, explore topical issues, engage in media criticism and build rapport.

However, such interactions remained infrequent and did not generally play an explicit role in news production. Only a select few pioneers—such as the Danish *Zetland* or the Dutch *De Correspondent*—had systematically integrated their audience communities into editorial workflows. As a result, the expectation of deepening audience participation remained only partially realised among these pioneers. The value of their interactions appeared primarily intrinsic and affective: discussions around news can be worthwhile in themselves if they provide a sense of belonging and enhance understanding of current affairs among both audience members and journalists. Nonetheless, the expectation served as a guiding signpost for their work, with several interviewees identifying the development of better tools and practices for audience interaction as the next stage in their outlet's evolution.

Beyond actual interactions, the journalists enacted the expectation of audience-oriented news through the distinct styles of their news delivery. Whereas daily news is typically reported in a detached and impersonal tone, the examined outlets presented it in an informal, relaxed, conversational and colloquial manner. Moreover, whereas news reports are conventionally confined to a descriptive, matter-of-fact style, and journalists' assessments are reserved for separate formats, such as news analyses, the pioneer journalists wove assessments, interpretations and contextualisations directly into their reporting. These textual practices were audience-oriented because they can help audiences better understand the contexts and implications of news events while also potentially making journalism more approachable and engaging.

Finally, following the expectation of journalism catering to specific audience segments, the pioneer journalists focused on selected beats or otherwise specialised

their journalism, thereby differentiating it from more general and conventional coverage. *Vox*, for instance, produced news analyses on politics, while *Quartz* focused on global business and economics. Some outlets targeted specific audiences, such as *Mustread* in Finland and *Politico* in the United States, which both are aimed at decision-makers. The outlets might also specialise in particular formats, such as the long-form journalism exemplified by *Long Play* or the live journalism events produced by *Musta laatikko*. However, while the outlets emphasised their unique identities and distinctive outputs, only a few specialised in narrow niches, such as *The Marshall Project,* which reported exclusively on the American criminal-justice system.

6.3 Embedding expectations and practices in the surrounding media landscape

In addition to the logics and affordances of digital technologies, the pioneer journalists grounded their expectations in the specific characteristics and challenges of today's digital-media landscape. Across the individual studies in this dissertation, they identified four key trends and challenges in contemporary journalism, as described below. Their journalistic products and practices aimed to respond to these developments and, in doing so, to explore new, more sustainable directions for professional journalism. As general strategies for navigating these conditions, the pioneer journalists expected journalistic production and distribution to rely less on social-media platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, data analytics and advertising revenue. They believed this shift would help restore journalistic autonomy and enable journalists to produce high-quality, diverse journalism that genuinely serves their audiences.

1) *Faltering advertising-based business models*. The pioneer journalists highlighted the long-standing trend that most digital advertising revenue is captured globally by just two companies, Meta (the parent company of Facebook and Instagram) and Alphabet (the parent company of Google). They noted that the resulting decline in newsrooms' advertising revenue has contributed to precarious working conditions, pressures to increase story output at the expense of quality and heightened stress among journalists. They also argued that the competition for advertising revenue threatens journalistic integrity as economic pressures increasingly influence editorial decisions.
2) *Declining quality of online news*. The pioneer journalists emphasised that digital platforms aim to capture users' attention through emotive and behaviourally manipulative strategies. They noted that this has resulted in

an influx of low-quality, clickbait content that generates views and revenue but fails to meaningfully inform audiences. The journalists criticised legacy news media for adapting to this trend and, in doing so, partially redefining newsworthiness according to audience metrics.

3) *Oversupply of online news*. The volume of news and other media content has dramatically increased with digital and social media. The pioneer journalists noted that this abundance is driven by the relatively low costs of digital publishing and the pressures on media outlets to generate advertising revenue. This, they argued, has resulted in content glut, news fatigue, information overload and growing difficulty in distinguishing meaningful content from noise.

4) *Lack of diversity in news*. Despite the growing volume of content, the pioneer journalists argued that audience metrics and social-media algorithms homogenise news by prioritising popularity. They further contended that the routines of legacy news media—shaped by a commitment to broad appeal and neutral, detached reporting—hinder coverage of the diverse perspectives, voices and interests in contemporary societies.

As described in section 6.1, the journalists viewed interactivity, communality, interest-based specialisation and commitment to professional ideology as key normative orientations for digital journalism. These orientations guided their interpretations of the four challenges and shaped their strategies for addressing them. In doing so, the journalists translated their expectations into concrete practices and professional approaches. These responses are outlined below.

1) *From advertising to audience-based revenue models.* Rather than relying on advertising, the pioneer journalists funded their work through subscriptions, memberships, donations and other forms of audience income. They argued that audiences are willing to pay for distinctive journalism they cannot find elsewhere as well for membership in news outlets' communities. Their expectation of specialised, audience-centric journalism was thus materially driven not only by digital affordances but also by the promise of financial sustainability supported by a dedicated and engaged audience.

2) *Improving the quality of online news*. The pioneer journalists contended that news organisations should prioritise journalistic quality to build trust, uphold journalistic standards and prestige and distinguish themselves in the crowded online news landscape. To these ends, they claimed to focus resources and expertise on their areas of specialisation while publishing less frequent but more rigorously validated, thoughtfully curated and insightful journalism. Supported by direct audience funding, the journalists

argued that catering to a dedicated audience enables them to produce analytical news stories without resorting to dramatisation, simplification and personification to generate clicks. They also highlighted the importance of audience interactions for better understanding their needs and preferences as well as for providing valuable feedback and insights on news stories.

3) *Making better sense of news abundance*. In addition to reducing content volume and avoiding overlap with other news producers, the pioneer journalists sought to mitigate news oversupply and information overload by providing contextualisation and synthesis of news events. They focused on news curation, commentary, analysis, investigative reporting, long-form stories and other forms of sensemaking journalism. As noted, even their daily 'hard news' stories incorporated journalists' assessments, interpretations and insights that purportedly help audiences make better sense of current events.

4) *Promoting diversity in news media*. The pioneer journalists pursued more varied and inclusive news coverage by focusing on underreported issues, diverse perspectives and niche interests. They regarded pluralism as an essential journalistic value as well as a necessary response to the socio-cultural diversification of contemporary societies. They expected that granting journalists greater personal autonomy would support heterogenous journalism by drawing on their individual interests, expertise and creativity. Likewise, they believed that engaging with audiences can broaden journalists' perspectives and deepen their understanding of underserved, marginalised and emerging issues.

By proposing these future-oriented approaches to industry-wide challenges, the pioneer journalists can potentially expand the appeal of their journalistic and business models across the broader news media. Low quality, oversupply and lack of representation are commonly cited by audiences as reasons for avoiding news (de Bruin et al., 2024; Villi et al., 2021). The pioneer journalists' model, which combines journalistic niches, the distinct expertise and sensibilities of individual journalists, direct audience interaction and audience-based revenue, offers a strategy that legacy news media could also adopt to counter news avoidance, improve their digital sensibilities and strengthen their revenue models. Before turning to the implications for legacy newsrooms in section 6.8, the following sections critically examine these approaches and discuss them in light of prior research.

6.4 Affective audience-centricity as a technological-normative pursuit

In addition to the audience turn, the pioneer journalists' news model embodies the affective-emotional turn of journalism (see sections 3.2 and 3.3). An affective conception of journalism became explicit when, for instance, a news outlet invited its audiences to share its 'passions' and 'obsessions' about specific topics (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018, pp. 83–84). Moreover, their informal and conversational news delivery underlined the production and consumption of journalism as affective, socially and personally meaningful experiences. This stands in contrast to the emotionally restrained tone of traditional news, which the journalists described as 'dull' and 'numbing' (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018, p. 84). For them, news and journalism should be exciting and arousing and leave a distinct, affective imprint on the reader, viewer or listener.

From the perspective of journalistic work, the pioneer journalists' affective news reflects a new work ethic that embraces self-expression and personal involvement as essential aspects of journalistic production. For them, a key role of a news outlet is to support journalists in pursuing their own ideals, ideas and visions of journalism. For example, the editor-in-chief of *Mustread* asserted that their journalists can freely choose what topics to cover and adopt a style that embodies their personal voices. In such practices, news events were made sense of through the insight and voice of individual journalists. Perhaps the most distinctive manifestation of this mediating subjectivity was seen in the live journalism production *Musta laatikko*, during which journalists presented stories through their own voices and physical presence before a live audience.

The journalists emphasised the significance of personal autonomy in their practice, which they enacted through self-expressive approaches to journalistic work. Beyond independence from external influence, personal autonomy refers to a journalist's ability to produce work guided by their own conceptions of 'good' journalism (Heft & Dogruel, 2019; Hess & Gutsche, 2018). This echoes an observation by Lindén et al. (2021) that journalistic 'passion', personal fulfilment and creativity have become commodified into emotional labour that is increasingly expected of journalists as news organisations seek to advance audience engagement and strengthen a work culture tailored to digital media. Therefore, the pioneer journalists' work ethic reflected not only their personal preferences but also emerging professional expectations in contemporary news media.

6.5 Peer-to-peer and the Californian Ideology in pioneer journalists' imaginaries of journalism futures

The pioneer journalists' strategies for addressing the challenges of digital news media were more than practical measures. These strategies and the expectations they enacted revealed underlying technological and normative assumptions about how digitalisation shapes—and should shape—news production and consumption. While the journalists distanced themselves from today's metrics-driven and algorithmically mediated digital media, they embraced digital technologies as a socially transformative and emancipatory force.

By advancing an interpersonal, specialised, interest-driven and affective model for digital news, the pioneer journalists drew on foundational socio-technological imaginaries that have shaped perceptions of the Internet and digital media since their early adoption in the 1960s and 1970s. Rooted in the countercultural ideals of that era, these imaginaries envisioned self-organising communities of interest operating outside the market and the bureaucracy by using 'small' technologies, such as networked personal computers (Turner, 2006). As an alternative to the hierarchical mass media, digital technologies were seen as revolutionary and emancipatory tools that allow users to express themselves, communicate directly with other users and obtain information of personal interest from an abundant diversity of sources (Kreiss et al., 2011).

These imaginaries suggest that by enabling open, decentralised and networked communication, the Internet shifts power from established institutions, such as professional journalism, towards self-organising user networks and geographically dispersed yet close-knit 'virtual' communities (Starkman, 2011). Within this vision, digital technologies promise to remedy the alienation of modern institutions by fostering authentic meaning, purpose and self-expression (Kreiss et al., 2011; Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). Normatively, these imaginaries propose a digital model for actualising liberal-democratic ideals, such as active and diverse public debate, self-governance, individual freedom and the cultivation of an authentic, autonomous self (Benkler, 2006). They have since been integrated into the mainstream digital culture and manifest in the discourses of personalised media content, flat hierarchies, interest-based communities and an affective-passionate approach to media use and digital labour (Castells, 2001).

Through their alignment with interest-based user networks, the pioneer journalists in this study embraced the socio-technological imaginary of peer-to-peer, which addresses the cultural and organisational potentials of digital technologies (Benkler, 2006). Within this imaginary, hierarchical and bureaucratic news institutions are regarded as unresponsive to the needs of news users and therefore

increasingly challenged by nimbler digital news media outlets and peer networks of shared affinities (Starkman, 2011). Media production within such networks is expected to authentically serve users' interests and identities—thereby more effectively addressing the cultural, social and informational needs of increasingly complex and diverse digital societies (Lévy, 1999). The journalists drew on peer-to-peer frameworks as they imagined ideal digital news that reflects the topical breadth and cultural diversity of the digital-media environment—grounded in affective, identity-based bonds among participants and offering not only factual information about current events but also broader meaning and a sense of social and cultural belonging.

The journalists' 'passionate' work ethic and audience-based business models, meanwhile, reflected another seminal imaginary of digital technologies, the Californian Ideology. Coined by Barbrook and Cameron (1996), the Californian Ideology denotes that "the development of the Internet, […] digital media, and their commercialization [are] driven by a specific political economy and social outlook emerging from Silicon Valley" (Hepp et al., 2023, p. 4144). This imaginary promotes a political economy in which digital technologies enable individuals to transform their personalities, interests and communities into sources of economic value—eventually reorganising entire industries around the monetisation of personal creativity and networked collaboration (Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). The journalists in this study aligned with this economic logic as they emphasised the monetisation of intrinsically motivated, passionate and self-actualising journalists who create news content tailored to, and co-produced with, engaged audiences (see also Lindén et al., 2021).

Drawing on these two socio-technological imaginaries, the pioneer journalists translated digital media's normative promises into journalistic practices, such as developing distinct news styles tailored to specific audiences. From a relational perspective, however, these imaginaries do not impose changes on journalism directly but through the norms and traditions that uphold its professional boundaries (Eldridge, 2019; Prandini, 2015). The findings of this study suggest dialogic journalism as such a normative-ideological mediator between journalistic and technological imaginaries. In dialogic journalism, journalists position themselves as part of the surrounding socio-cultural world and its many perspectives and voices (Marchionni, 2015)—much like the imaginaries of digital technologies, which envision communication within mediated communities of shared meaning rather than top-down information transmission. The following section explores the correspondences between dialogic journalism and the two constitutive technological imaginaries by discussing them as the pioneer journalists' normative-ideological foundation for adapting news to digital media.

6.6 Dialogic journalism and digital imaginaries as the normative foundations of pioneers' journalistic practice

Dialogic journalism is an influential tradition in which journalists engage in dialogue across diverse perspectives rather than merely transmit news reports on current affairs (Hornmoen & Steensen, 2014). It stands in contrast to the historically dominant objectivist tradition, which positions journalists as detached observers reporting news in a clear, descriptive, formal and impersonal tone. Instead, dialogic journalism emphasises journalists' active involvement and collaboration with audiences to collectively make sense of news events and issues (Soffer, 2009). Rejecting authoritative, monologic and detached accounts, dialogic journalists incorporate multiple perspectives and polyphonic voices into news narratives and routinely interact with their audiences (Martin & Murrell, 2021). In doing so, they aim to construct nuanced, multifaceted news accounts, engage audiences in public life and create rapport among participants (Koivunen et al., 2021). As Marchionni (2015) summarised the dialogic ideal, 'Rather than talking *at* them, [dialogic] journalists work *with* audience members to more fully capture the truth of a story' (p. 222, emphasis in the original).

The pioneer journalists' conceptions of 'good' journalism consistently reflected these dialogic ideals, approaches and practices. Across the research material, they questioned the possibility of uncovering a singular, objective truth through reporting. Instead, they emphasised the importance of engaging with diverse perspectives and drawing insights from audience members to better capture the complexity of news events and issues. Beyond these epistemological considerations, the journalists also adopted key dialogic practices (see section 6.2): interacting with audiences and presenting news in conversational, affective and evaluative registers (Harbers, 2016; Koivunen et al., 2021).

These dialogic norms and practices align closely with both peer-to-peer and the Californian Ideology. Each approach seeks to democratise and decentralise communication, challenge hierarchical social structures and routines, encourage collective participation and emphasise individual agency over institutional authority. All three are grounded in liberal-democratic ideals of empowering individuals and their grassroots communities. By pursuing similar normative goals as the two imaginaries of networked digital media, digitally oriented journalists can draw on the dialogic tradition to legitimise and normalise the participatory and interactive practices enabled by digital technologies.

Yet, there are important distinctions between dialogic journalism and the digital imaginaries. Dialogic journalism encourages inclusive deliberation on matters of public interest and promotes egalitarian, interpersonal relationships between

journalists and audiences without requiring shared interests or tastes (Marchionni, 2015; Min, 2020). In contrast, peer-to-peer and the Californian Ideology focus on the interests of like-minded individuals within insular, self-governing communities. These imaginaries advocate withdrawing from traditional politics in favour of technological solutions, grassroots digital activism and unrestrained information flows as primary engines of social progress (Schneider, 2023).

Reflecting this ethos, the pioneer journalists often prioritised informing and empowering first and foremost the members of their exclusive audience communities. One news outlet, for example, expressed its mission as 'build[ing] a community of *like-minded people*' (Ruotsalainen & Villi, 2018, p. 83, emphasis added), while another, a minorities-focused outlet—adopting a slogan from the African American civil rights movement—aimed to produce journalism 'For us, by us' (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021, p. 1057). Such exclusivity, together with a focus on specialised niche coverage, distinguished the pioneering approaches from dialogic journalism and aligned them instead with peer-to-peer logics and the Californian Ideology. Somewhat paradoxically, the future of public-oriented journalism—facilitating discussion and participation in matters of public interest—may lie in exclusive news communities that are small and distinctive enough to provide a 'safe space' for constructive debate and exchange of ideas.

6.7 Criticism of dialogic journalism in online media

In practicing dialogic journalism, the pioneer journalists situated themselves within long-standing audience- and public-oriented ideals. Through these practices and normative pursuits, they potentially enhanced their legitimacy and credibility in two ways: by evoking journalistic traditions that support active citizenship and by developing new routines that resonate with the participatory ethos of digital media. However, their integration of dialogic ideals with the individualist-communalist aspirations of digital imaginaries paradoxically raises concerns about informational equality and the diminishing role of journalism as a service to the public. As discussed in section 3.2., while audience participation in media production can be engaging and fulfilling, it primarily involves elite media users who have the motivation and resources to take part (Kreiss, 2018; Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). Dialogic digital journalism may, therefore, end up further empowering information elites and exacerbating inequalities between audience groups (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Robinson & Wang, 2018). Pay models can deepen this divide by placing news behind paywalls and incentivising journalists to cater to more affluent audiences (Neff et al., 2022).

Alongside promoting public participation, dialogic journalism also promises greater diversity in news content (Borger et al., 2019). While more diverse

journalism can support pluralistic publics and amplify minority voices, it, too, can exacerbate inequalities in digital news diets (Uluorta & Quill, 2022). Research has shown that as the number of online news sources increases, so too do inequalities in their consumption (Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2018). A more diverse media landscape also creates opportunities for 'dark participation', in which malicious actors exploit participatory affordances for harmful purposes (Quandt, 2018). For example, far-right alternative news sites routinely adopt the informal and emotional language of dialogic journalism to better engage their audiences (Sparks & Hmielowski, 2022).

These paradoxes of dialogic, audience-oriented digital journalism seemed to be a blind spot for the journalists, as they rarely discussed them (cf. Lewis, 2012). They expected digital journalism to better respond to audience preferences without fully considering the broader public relevance and societal implications of such journalism. Notably, only one of the interviewed journalists expressed a need to serve the 'common people' in news delivery (Ruotsalainen et al., 2021, p. 1058). The pioneer journalists, therefore, appeared to accept as a given that only a small minority actively engages with the news, while a vast majority of the audience remains indifferent at best (see Nelson, 2024).

6.8 Implications for the futures of legacy news media

Pioneer journalists' broader influence on journalism and the journalistic profession depends on the extent to which legacy news organisations adopt and adapt their expectations, imaginaries and practices. Such influence is plausible because legacy news media face the same fundamental challenges as the studied pioneers: monetising news, re-engaging audiences and adapting journalism to digital culture and user behaviour. In response, legacy news publications are also exploring ways to enhance and rethink journalistic quality, mitigate news fatigue and content glut, diversify both their news coverage and workforce and meaningfully interact with news users (Newman & Cherubini, 2025).

At the heart of these challenges is the evolving relationship between journalism, its audiences, and digital platforms. Legacy newsrooms generally approach their audiences through data and metrics rather than direct interaction. Their analytics-driven approaches aim to increase quantified audience engagement, maximise content distribution and ultimately convert users into paying subscribers (Blassnig & Esser, 2022). This instrumental approach, however, may fall short in building lasting and involved audience relationships. It reduces audience members to data sources, objects of algorithmic news targeting and passive consumers rather than active participants (Nelson & Schmidt, 2022). Moreover, by revealing what performs

well with audiences, newsroom metrics tend to incentivise the production of high-traffic, click-driven news content—often at the expense of journalistic substance, quality and relevance (Tandoc & Thomas, 2015).

Despite their focus on data-driven newsroom routines, legacy news organisations are increasingly aware of their limitations in understanding and serving their audiences (Edgerly & Thorson, 2024). Following news nonprofits and other producers of audience-centric journalism, pioneers among legacy news outlets are seeking a stronger relationship with audience members through personal interactions via digital channels or on-site events (Nelson, 2018). Moreover, there is a growing recognition among legacy news publications that to support financial sustainability and better reflect the demographics and cultural climate of the surrounding society, they need to diversify their journalism and make greater efforts to reach beyond their core audience of older, wealthy, educated and white individuals (Edgerly & Thorson, 2024).

However, legacy newsrooms' efforts to become closer with their audiences are constrained by long-standing editorial norms and routines (Blassnig & Esser, 2022). They have traditionally served a broad, largely undifferentiated public while maintaining a distance from the audience to safeguard editorial independence. Although catering to a mass audience may reinforce the public relevance of their journalism, it can also hinder meaningful audience engagement and collaboration. Nelson (2018) found that legacy journalists' interactions with audience segments and specific groups are typically more constructive and productive than those with an undifferentiated mass audience, such as in comment sections. He argued that as news publishers pursue a stronger bond with audience members, they should segment audiences into distinct groups and tailor news production accordingly. His study also showed that shared interests in specific topics serve as important catalysts for sustained, constructive and collaborative relationships between legacy journalists and their audiences.

This shift toward segmentation and specialisation is often driven less by editorial goals than by news organisations' strategies to grow digital subscriptions and memberships. Research has shown that hard paywalls are most effective when they gatekeep specialised news products that offer high personal or professional relevance for a relatively small but committed group of users (O'Brien et al., 2020). Accordingly, legacy newsrooms' subscription sales pitches often echo the participatory-networked practices of digital media, such as offering subscribers an insider status within their audience community (Newman et al., 2020). Along these lines, Nechushtai and Zalmanson (2021) observed that while news was once sold as an information service, today's legacy news subscriptions increasingly promise a relationship grounded in social, affective and normative appeals.

Pioneer journalists' interest- and community-based news models may provide legacy media with new strategies for addressing their current challenges. However, the unintended outcomes and normative contradictions of these models are likely to become amplified if adopted at scale by legacy media—potentially exacerbating informational inequalities, undermining public discussion and deepening cultural and political polarisation (Nelson, 2021; Usher, 2021). Mass-scale audience segmentation can sow distrust between social and political groups and towards news outlets not perceived as 'one's own' (Ferrucci et al., 2020). As a result, journalists could become less inclined to cover important news that falls outside the perceived interests of their paying audiences—or their own—thus narrowing the scope and democratic roles of journalism.

7 Conclusion and Discussion

The futures of journalism have been extensively debated among media professionals, academics, journalists and the broader public since the 1990s, when the Internet became widely adopted and the first news websites were launched (e.g. Negroponte, 1995). Since then, digitalisation has reshaped the organisational structures, production and distribution models, business strategies and epistemological authority of news media (Lowrey & Shan, 2018). Yet no distinctly digital model has emerged to restore the economic sustainability, institutional standing and public legitimacy that professional journalism once held as the 'fourth estate'—delivering broadly trusted, timely reporting on matters of public interest and holding governments and other power holders accountable (Carlson, 2017). Instead, the news media have lost their status as gatekeepers of public discussion and news provision while becoming just one actor among many in the fragmented, digital-media landscape (Chadwick, 2013).

As digitalisation has advanced, both the news industry and journalism research have shown growing interest in entrepreneurial and other pioneer journalists who experiment with prototypes of journalism's digital futures (Hepp & Loosen, 2019; Singer, 2017). Unburdened by the entrenched structures and routines of print and broadcast media, these pioneers are regarded as uniquely positioned to imagine alternative futures for journalism and to develop innovative models, technologies, concepts and practices that help bring those futures to fruition (Cools et al., 2024). While research has examined the norms and practices of these 'innovation agents' (Carlson & Usher, 2016)—ranging from for-profit outlets with global reach, such as the now-defunct *Buzzfeed News* (Tandoc, 2017), to nonprofit news cooperatives (Siapera & Papadopoulou, 2016)—much less attention has been given to how these actors envision the futures of journalism, how such visions shape their practices and how pioneers are themselves reshaped within the digital-media landscape.

This study has contributed to research on the futures of journalism by examining the futures knowledge of journalistic pioneers in two dimensions: expectations and imaginaries. Expectations referred to their shorter-term, practice-oriented anticipations that were grounded in the dynamics of the late-2010s media landscape and addressed the challenges facing news media in that environment. Imaginaries,

in turn, captured the longer-term, normative idealisations that imbued these expectations and practices with affective meaning and shared purpose (on expectations and imaginaries as futures concepts, see Bazzani, 2023).

The journalists in this study outlined a model that reorients journalism around users and their communities of interest. They reimagined professional journalists as users of digital technologies who develop expertise on issues about which they are passionate, build a following by reporting on these interests and monetise their work through direct audience support. Audience members—as like-minded users or 'peers'—participate in the production and circulation of this specialised knowledge. To support this participation, the pioneers sought direct, organic connections with their audiences rather than relying on algorithmically mediated interactions and metrics-based understandings of them.

The study showed how these user- and community-centric expectations were rooted, on the one hand, in the journalistic imaginary of dialogic journalism (Soffer, 2009) and on the other in the socio-technological imaginaries that underpin much of digital culture and business logics—peer-to-peer and the Californian Ideology (Benkler, 2006; Barbrook & Cameron, 1996). By drawing on these imaginaries and their ideal of organic digital connection, the pioneer journalists infused their work with both journalistic credibility and 'original' digital meaning, purpose and legitimacy that predate today's algorithmic social media. In so doing, they did what pioneer actors and communities typically do: facilitated the integration of Silicon Valley technological imaginaries into the imaginaries of other societal fields such as journalism (Hepp, 2024).

Within this conversational media ecology of peer production, the pioneers still expected journalists to uphold their distinct institutional status by adhering to core professional norms: factuality, timeliness, public relevance, critical scrutiny and clear, compelling delivery (see Deuze, 2005). At the same time, they contended that journalism must adapt to the logics and incentives of digital media by downplaying its traditional institutional roles. This model challenged the normative conventions of news production and distribution by prioritising an outlet's 'own' audience over the general public, promoting specialisation in specific beats and formats rather than providing a comprehensive daily news service and encouraging journalists to express their individual voices, interests and expertise rather than suppressing them in favour of appearing objective.

The pioneer journalists in this study can thus be seen at the forefront of a formative trajectory that continues to shape journalism today. As Bissie Anderson (2025, p. 564–565) observed regarding this diverging trend,

> . . . [journalism] seems to be moving in two contrasting directions at once: towards a more transparent, collaborative journalism on the one hand, and

> towards algorithmically driven, black-box journalism, on the other, with the latter raising important ethical questions about editorial autonomy and transparency.

At present, legacy news organisations' data- and algorithmic-centric models are increasingly aligning with the logics of algorithmic 'black box' journalism (Anderson, 2025; Lindén, 2017). They are also likely to further consolidate their comparative advantage in technological systems by integrating artificial intelligence across all stages of the news process (Sjøvaag, 2024). Yet, pressures to enhance audience engagement and cultivate audience-based revenue streams simultaneously push legacy outlets to interact and collaborate more directly with their audiences (Edgerly & Thorson, 2024; Nelson, 2018, 2021). In pursuing these strategic goals, legacy news organisations may increasingly follow pioneers' example by experimenting with more 'organic', non-automated products and practices—particularly if the drawbacks of the platform economy, algorithmic news distribution and AI-generated news become increasingly apparent.

While the expectation of more transparent and participatory journalism corresponds to interactive and personalised digital media, the examined journalists also addressed the challenges of contemporary digital news. They asserted that declining advertising revenue and intensified competition for online attention have led to an oversupply of news and a decline in its quality—what one interviewee described as a 'race to the bottom' in the pursuit of clicks (J. Ruotsalainen, personal communication, 19 October 2018). The journalists argued that these dynamics have contributed to information overload, news avoidance and the erosion of journalistic authority among audiences. They further contended that the potential for greater social, cultural and informational diversity in digital news has largely gone unrealised. Instead, they believed that audience metrics and economic pressures have made news even more uniform than before.

The pioneer journalists argued that audience-funded and non-algorithmic news could counter these trends and revive an idealised past when journalism allegedly upheld high standards, enjoyed broad trust and maintained strong editorial autonomy. They contended that detaching from advertising revenue, algorithmic distribution and data analytics would strengthen editorial independence. They also argued that diversifying coverage, reducing news stories that overlap with other outlets and providing interpretive insight into news events would enhance journalism's relevance among audiences and that prioritising quality over speed and high publishing volumes would improve the accuracy, validity and meaningfulness of news content. Moreover, in pursuing more audience-oriented routines, they prioritised direct distribution channels such as email newsletters, website or app traffic and in-person events. They likewise favoured direct and two-way

communication channels through proprietary platforms, closed social-media groups, in-person events and surveys.

Through these approaches, the pioneer journalists aimed to restore the value and legitimacy of professional journalism in the digital-media environment. However, despite its potential benefits for the news industry and audiences, the outlined model can conflict with the journalistic norm of serving the public (Deuze, 2005). It exemplifies what Inayatullah (2008) described as a 'used future': its prescriptions stem from a utopian vision of digital technologies as great equalisers and emancipators of individuals and their communities (Kreiss et al., 2011). Once representing a transformative future, these notions have become 'used' as many of their promises have failed to materialise and their real-world complexities and unintended consequences have become increasingly apparent.

By replacing hierarchical, one-way news delivery with more interactive and collaborative practices, pioneer journalists' approaches may empower some media users while leaving others underserved (see Van Dijck & Nieborg, 2009). By presuming an active and engaged readership, this type of journalism is likely to resonate most with audience groups already invested in news and journalism. If widely adopted, the model therefore risks reinforcing existing inequalities in news consumption (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018; Robinson & Wang, 2018).

These reflections underscore a persistent paradox between professional control and open participation in digital news. As observed by Lewis (2012), the user-centric logic of digital media encourages journalists to prioritise participatory users and their needs. In contrast, renewing journalism in line with its normative foundations would stress reaching less-engaged audiences and safeguarding editorial independence from excessive audience influence, including the risk of focusing narrowly on issues that are important to specific audience groups. Notably, the journalists in this study rarely addressed these concerns.

The control-participation paradox illustrates how pioneers' creative agency is embedded in complex socio-material relations that both enable and constrain their choices (see Antonacopoulou & Fuller, 2020; Thompson et al., 2020). Because participation has been the dominant historical norm in digital media, challenging it or envisioning alternatives can be difficult (Perreault & Ferrucci, 2020; Vos & Thomas, 2023). Economic incentives further reinforce participation and audience-centricity because many news organisations already derive most of their income directly from audiences. Yet, as journalists employ digital affordances to better engage their audiences and serve diverse interests, they may inadvertently reproduce the very exclusivity and elitism that professional journalism has long been criticised for—and that participatory, audience-centric models have sought to overcome (Ferrucci, 2017; Wagemans et al., 2019).

Journalists can move beyond the used futures of digital imaginaries by critically addressing their shortcomings in relation to journalistic norms. Thomas (2022), for instance, argued for a return to a 'we write, you read' journalism, in which audience interaction is limited and professional control, gatekeeping and institutional authority are emphasised. Besides potentially reaching broader publics, this model would enable focusing scarce newsroom resources on journalism's most essential roles—providing timely and critical news about public affairs (Nielsen, 2017).

Another, alternative way forward is to more fully realise the participatory potentials of digital imaginaries. A preferred future for digital journalism might be one in which traditional, 'we write, you read' journalism and digital-native approaches coexist and intersect. By evoking a 'nostalgic' return to a pre-algorithmic era of news distribution and audience engagement, the pioneer journalists' model presents an alternative to the predominant, data-centric conceptions and practices of digital journalism. However, the systematic adoption of digital-native approaches remained only a partially realised ideal among the pioneer journalists in this study. They typically limited audience interactions to social-media or occasional events, whereas full audience participation would require involving audience members at most stages of the journalistic process (Lewis, 2012; Robinson & Wang, 2018). Even so, the pursuit of audience participation continued to guide their work as a yet-unrealised but essential goal for the future development of their outlets. Moreover, while they specialised in selected beats and issues, the pioneer journalists still tended to focus on traditional news beats, such as politics or the economy. Following the example of other digital pioneers (Hurcombe, 2024; Lokot & Diakopoulos, 2015), they could further narrow their focus and deepen their specialisation to more fully engage niche audiences.

By examining how pioneers articulated and enacted imagined futures within the present socio-material media landscape, this study has contributed both to the methodology of pioneer analysis (Heinonen, 2017; Heinonen & Karjalainen, 2019) and to deepening the epistemological and methodological connections between futures studies and social theory (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015). While futures studies has focused on producing analyses of alternative futures to be used in decision-making, it has tended to overlook the actual social and material processes through which conceptions of futures are generated, transformed, communicated and enacted in specific contexts. As demonstrated by this study, the sociology of expectations offers useful theoretical and methodological approaches to capture the socially shared and often tacit anticipations on which actors draw to navigate the diversity of options in their present environment (Van Lente, 2012).

The findings suggest several promising directions for future research. First, future studies can examine more recent digital news outlets to assess how they are enacting the still-unfulfilled expectations identified among the pioneers in this

study—particularly the integration of audience communities in editorial processes and the specialisation in highly specific niches. Second, research could explore initiatives aimed at engaging audiences who are disinterested in or underserved by the existing news outlets. This would shift focus away from the highly educated, digitally literate and affluent groups who now constitute the primary audience of these journalists.

Third, emerging efforts to reduce reliance on social media platforms, algorithmic mediation and audience analytics in news production and distribution merit further investigation. This includes examining how news outlets address challenges in contemporary digital media environment, such as news fatigue and perceptions of declining quality. Finally, research can explore how legacy news organisations are adopting and adapting ideas and approaches first developed by pioneer journalists. Such inquiry would illuminate how expectations and practices evolve as they diffuse across the field, offering a more comprehensive understanding of journalism's potential futures.

In futures studies, research could analyse how industry-specific expectations are articulated in relation to current developments and issues, how they circulate and evolve within professional discourse and how they shape present-day practices and product development. This approach would shift analytical focus from alternative futures to the intricate ways those futures are used, mobilised and reshaped in the present. These insights could, in turn, inform more reflexive futures work that provides nuanced accounts of contemporary conditions and explores futures as they are lived within contested, overlapping forces rather than projected into emptied temporal horizons by foresight experts.

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