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Quality Journalism: The View from the Trenches

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The cover is a word-cloud consisting of all the words in the English interviews for the project.

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1. Introduction

'I fundamentally believe readers are willing to pay for quality journalism.'

Chief executive of *Financial Times* John Ridding, 2.10.2009

'Quality journalism will remain the strongest selling-point for Helsingin Sanomat also in the future.'

Editor-in-Chief of *Helsingin Sanomat* Janne Virkkunen, 31.3.2010

'The quality of our journalism will make or break our industry, not the recession.'

Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun* Rebekah Wade, 27.1.2009

A writer unafraid of using the odd cliché might say these are the best of times and the worst of times for journalism. On the one hand there is the tremendous excitement of WikiLeaks and the promise of new forms of journalistic expression brought about by technological change, such as data journalism or multimedia storytelling on the iPad.

On the other hand, there is the mood of uncertainty caused by the persistent crisis of traditional business models for newspapers. The recession is now over, but the numbers for the newspaper-industry still look fairly bleak. In Britain the latest circulation figures report year-on-year circulation drops of almost 12 percent for *The Times*¹ and

¹ National newspaper print circulations for April 2011

almost nine percent for the *Guardian*². In the US both advertising and circulation revenues for *The New York Times* continued to fall in 2010³ even though the economy has been growing for well over two years.

Before getting too depressed one must remember, however, that in other markets the outlook for newspaper journalism is either very good (examples: India and Brazil) or at least markedly less bad than in Great Britain and United States (examples: Finland and Germany). But all in all the talk about the crisis of the business-model for newspapers has by no means faded as the economic situation has moved closer to normal.

As can be surmised from the quotes above, some newspaper managers view quality as the one key thing that will save journalism from the current crisis. The logic seems clear: people are still willing to pay for quality, so if we do quality journalism, we will be ok.

It is less clear if the cold numbers, such as circulation figures, support this logic. In doing this research, however, I take the idea that quality will save newspapers as a given, even though when scrutinized more closely it perhaps starts to look less like an undisputable fact and a bit more like wishful thinking, though admittedly wishful thinking that has some grounds in the factual world.

For example, if quality can save newspapers, how is it possible that in just the past five years (February 2006–

² Ibid.

³ The New York Times Company, 2010 Annual report

February 2011) the *Guardian* and *The Times* have both lost over 40 percent⁴ and *The Independent* has lost over 25 percent⁵ of its weekday circulation? In 2010 The Guardian lost almost £100,000 a day in cash terms, meaning it made an annual loss of over £33 million.⁶ All of these newspapers lie firmly at the quality end of the British newspaper market. Maybe quality saves the circulation from sinking all the way to zero?

The other counterfactual argument is that some of the biggest success stories in printed media in the past years have by no means been at the high quality end of the market. I take an example from Finland, where a weekly magazine called *Seitsemän Päivää* (*Seven Days*) was founded by the Norwegian company Aller in 1992. The magazine concentrates on scandals and gossip and it was and still is intensely frowned upon by many of the 'more serious' journalists.

All the frowning did not stop *Seiska* from very quickly reaching a circulation of 100,000 and within five years it had a circulation of over 200,000 copies each week. *Seiska* has not been totally immune to the decline of circulation affecting Finnish newsmagazines, but it still has a circulation of 211,000⁷, down from a high of over 265,000⁸ copies five years ago.

⁴ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/abcs>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Guardian News and Media Limited: Report of the directors and financial statements for the year ended 3 April 2011*

⁷ www.levikintarkastus.fi

⁸ Ibid.

But instead of criticizing the idea of quality saving journalism, I am going to concentrate on a problem at the very heart of that idea: the concept of quality. People (editors or proprietors most of the time) talking about quality journalism usually never define what they mean by the term. This is problematic.

In some fields of human endeavour the concept of quality is a clear one. In some cases it is even very rigidly defined by a set of written standards, in others it is a less well defined set of qualities, but one that most people agree upon: for example a quality car is one that does not break down very often.

When it comes to journalism this is not the case, as the meaning of word quality is very hazy and elastic. It is telling that in the quotes starting this chapter both the Editor-in-Chief of *The Sun* and the Chief Executive of *Financial Times* subscribe to the idea that quality will save journalism. When reading their two newspapers side by side it becomes obvious just how different definitions the concept of quality journalism can have.

My own experience is that there is no common, widely accepted definition for quality journalism. I have studied journalism in two universities, one in Finland and one in the United States. I have also studied business-journalism in the journalism school set up by the biggest newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*. Academics love definitions, so it would seem likely that somewhere along the way I would have stumbled upon a commonly accepted definition of quality journalism. But I have not.

But maybe academia is the wrong place to look for a definition of quality. Maybe the concept is defined in practice, in different newspapers and magazines, all of which might have their own views of what constitutes quality journalism in that particular media?

I will think back again. I have some 15 years experience working in printed media in Finland. I have worked for three Finnish newspapers, one newsmagazine and an internet news site. I do not remember that in any of those I would have heard or seen a definition of what quality journalism means for that particular medium.

So if there is a common definition of quality journalism, I at least seem to have missed it.

It must be stressed at this point that the study takes an unashamedly practical viewpoint. There have been a number of theoretical works on definitions of quality journalism, such as the excellent summary written by a former Reuters Journalist Fellow Johanna Vehkoo in her paper, *What is quality journalism?*⁹

Vehkoo provides a thorough and highly readable summary of theories of quality journalism, so for a reader interested in the theoretical side of things the paper is heartily recommended reading. My idea is to complement the theoretical viewpoint by taking the subjective view and to try to find definitions of quality journalism from the

⁹ Vehkoo 2010.

people actually doing journalism, the working journalists themselves.

This study aims to do two things.

The first and the most important aim is to examine as thoroughly as possible what people working in various newspapers think are the components of quality journalism. This part of the research also gathers some of their opinions about the claims made about the quality in journalism, for example that it is severely threatened by a lack of time and other resources.

The second aim is to contrast and compare views that different actors in the field have about quality journalism. Defining quality journalism is by no means easy, so comparisons of various definitions and opinions people express in the interviews should provide rich material.

In this research I am doing two sets of comparisons with the material gathered from a total of fourteen interviews. The first comparison is between two different countries, Finland and England. The second comparison is between different print-media: tabloid newspapers, broadsheet newspapers and weekly newsmagazines.

Throughout these interviews I am looking for an answer to the question whether there is a common definition to be found for quality journalism? If there is, what are the parts that make up that definition? And if there is not, what does that mean for the idea of quality as the saviour

of journalism? Can the future of journalism be built upon an idea of quality, if that idea turns out to have wildly varying definitions for different people?

2. Method and the interviews

2.1. The method

'The interview is the worst feature of the new journalism--- it is degrading to the interviewer, disgusting to the interviewee and tiresome to the public.'

Le Figaro, 1886

The method chosen for the research was the semi-structured interview, defined as 'a qualitative data collection strategy in which the researcher asks informants a series of predetermined but open-ended questions.'¹⁰

In practice each interview consisted of the same set of open questions in the same order. The basic structure of the interview was always the same.

The downside of the semi-structured interview is that it leaves fewer possibilities to deviate from the set agenda or explore new themes that come up in the interview, for example. This means that the information gathered will not necessarily be as rich as with completely unstructured interviews, which do not follow a set pattern and are more free-form.

In this case unstructured interviews were not even considered because of time constraints. Setting up a three-hour open interview and possibly a follow up would

¹⁰ Ayres 2008.

undoubtedly have led to richer information about definitions of quality-journalism, but it would have also been quite impossible. Setting up a single twenty-minute interview and then stretching it into a half hour or 45 minute one proved to be difficult enough.

The upside of semi-structured interviews is that compared with unstructured interviews they are more likely to produce material that allows for comparison between different interviews, because everyone is answering the same set of questions and going through the same themes. This aspect was important, because of the idea of comparing and contrasting the views presented in different interviews.

I divided the interviews into two parts. First was a set of 15 open questions (see Appendix I). I wanted to do open questions, because I thought these would provide richer and more varied material than the more often used method of compiling a ready-made list of attributes of quality journalism and then going through it with the interviewees.

Ask people 'Is accuracy an attribute of journalistic quality?', and you will get a simple yes for an answer and that will be it. Ask 'What do you think are the attributes of quality journalism?' or better yet 'What were the attributes that made this piece quality journalism?' and the answer will probably be more varied, rich and interesting. The answer, or range of answers from 15 open interviews are also admittedly much more difficult to formulate into a coherent research-paper, but I think it is a trade-off worth making.

Furthermore, going through a ready-made list of attributes of quality journalism will not necessarily produce any new insights, because interviewees will likely just stick to the list and the ideas provided by the researcher.

When designing the questionnaire I was very aware that formulating a working definition of quality journalism might be somewhat difficult even for seasoned journalists. The other risk was to ask for definitions and end up with abstract platitudes that have no real bearing on what really happens in journalistic organizations.

I tried to solve these problems by using three different approaches.

I did ask for concise definitions of quality journalism, but only at the end of the interview. These definitions are reproduced in small boxes throughout the text. The idea is to make the voice of the interviewees heard, so the definitions are reproduced in their glorious original, more or less well thought out form without any comments:

Q: Define quality journalism?
A: It is stuff I would read.

Writer, The Economist

In the course of the interview I also asked the interviewees to name a recent article in their newspaper that they considered was good quality, and then analyze what factors made it quality. Additionally I had a show-and-tell type of question, where the interviewees were

shown two articles from different newspapers or magazines. Then they were asked if they thought they were quality journalism and to elaborate, why that was or wasn't the case.

In the British interviews one of the articles was from *The Economist* and the other from the *Daily Mail*. In the Finnish interviews one of the articles was from *Suomen Kuvailehti* and the other from *Hymy (Smile)*, a monthly magazine with very tabloidish content.

The second part, done at the end of each interview, after the open questions, consisted of a set of four claims about quality journalism. These claims were formulated as a way of checking how much currency some of the ideas concerning quality journalism have in the field. The interviewees were asked if they thought the claims were right or wrong. These were classical closed questions, defined as 'a type of question posed by researchers to participants in research projects that specifies the parameters within which participants can frame their answers.'¹¹ A yes or no, true or false answer was sufficient, but interviewees had the chance to elaborate if they wished to do so.

The four claims were:

1. People are still willing to pay for quality journalism
2. Decisions made in the business-side of operations threaten the quality of journalism

¹¹ Roulston 2008

3. Lack of time makes it impossible to do quality journalism
4. Quality will save journalism from the crisis it is in.

The answers form a sort of quick semi-quantitative glimpse of what the interviewees think about some of the central issues concerning quality of journalism. They are presented in Chapter 9.

The third claim was badly formulated and thus ended up being a bit of a dud. No self-respecting journalist would say that lack of time makes it impossible to do quality work; some of the best pieces are done with the strictest of deadlines. The idea was to see if the interviewees agreed that the ever-increasing workload makes it more difficult to do quality pieces.

I unfortunately realized that the question was badly formulated only when I had already done all the Finnish interviews, so it was too late to change it and still allow for comparisons.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: It is keeping watch on those in power for the citizens while striving for as much integrity and fairness as possible. Maintaining your integrity at all times, even though it is terribly difficult. Done with a critical, uncompromising attitude and maximum independence. OK, that wasn't very short.

Writer, Iltalehti

2.2. The interviewees

One of my main points of interest was to compare and contrast views that different people have about quality journalism. With this in mind I decided to look for two sets of comparisons:

- Between three types of printed media: broadsheet, magazine and tabloid

- Between two countries: Finland and Britain

The pairs of media chosen were *Financial Times* and *Helsingin Sanomat* for broadsheets, *The Economist* and *Suomen Kuvailehti* for magazines and *The Sun* and *Iltalehti* for the tabloids. Short descriptions of the papers follow:

Name	Description	Publisher	Circulation	1 yr change	10 yr change
The Sun	Daily newspaper (Mon-Sat)	News International	2,818,000	-4,03 %	-20 %
The Economist	Weekly newsmagazine	The Economist Group	210,204 ¹	+11 % ²	+53 % ³
Financial Times	Daily newspaper (Mon-Sat)	The Financial Times Group	362,685	-9,3 %	-29 %
Iltalehti	Daily newspaper (Mon-Sat)	Alma Media	107,152	-5%	-15 %
Helsingin Sanomat	Daily newspaper	Sanoma Corporation	374,503	-4 %	-16 %

Suomen	Weekly	Otavamedia	88,600	-8 %	-13 %
Kuvailehti	newsmagazine				

¹ Worldwide: 1,473,939 Source: Levikintarkastus, ABC, The Economist

Group

² Worldwide: +39 %

³ Worldwide: +95 %

It can be argued that *FT* and *The Economist* are special cases, which should not be compared with their more general counterparts *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Suomen Kuvailehti*. I wanted to pick these newspapers, however, because they are also aimed at a general readership and most importantly because they represent what most people would agree is the highest possible quality in the UK market. A comparison with Finnish printed media strictly concentrating on business and economy, such as the newspaper *Kauppalehti* or the newsmagazine *Talouselämä* would not have been very apt.

In hindsight more of the problem was that perhaps I picked too successful newspapers and magazines. None of the media chosen for the project suffer from the worst problems affecting printed press today, so in most cases the material about the pressures the lack of both time and money place on the quality of journalism were not as rich as they would have been coming from people working in really struggling newspapers or magazines. In the end these issues were not central for my research, so I would argue this weakness is not a fatal one.

In all three Finnish media I managed to secure interviews with Editors-in-Chief, in *The Sun* I interviewed the Executive Editor and in *FT* and *The Economist* European Editors. For a full list of interviewees, see Appendix II.

In choosing writers to interview I aimed for a group with both seasoned and more inexperienced journalists. The most experienced interviewee has been working in journalism for 51 years, the most inexperienced one seven years.

One of the issues I wanted to look into more carefully was how journalistic organizations transfer their ideas of journalistic quality, or how they teach or tell new employees what their idea of quality journalism is. To do this I picked two interviewees who had recently changed jobs, as they would probably have a clearer idea of this than someone who had been working in the same paper for 25 years.

I ran into problems with the third group of interviewees, the publishers. The idea with these interviews was to explore if the people working on the money-side of things have totally different ideas of what quality journalism means when compared to the editorial side.

It is often claimed that executives make decisions that are harmful to the quality of the editorial product, because they have no idea what goes into producing quality journalism or how things operate in the editorial side. This has from time to time certainly been my own experience from the company publishing the magazine where I work.

The first problem was that in Finland the Editor-in-Chief often also acts as the Publisher. This is a fairly recent development. Both in *Helsingin Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* the Editor-in-Chief I interviewed was also the Publisher. I did

interview the publisher responsible for *Suomen Kuvailehti* at the Otavamedia publishing company.

The second problem was access, as it was almost impossible to set up interviews with publishers in the UK. The one exception was *The Economist*.

So in the end I did 14 interviews ranging from 20 minutes to 50 minutes in length. All in all when I was done there was over eight hours of talk about quality journalism.

The bulk of questions were the same for all three groups, but there were some specific questions for writers, editors and publishers. In two of the Finnish interviews editors answered the questions for both editors and publishers, because of their double role in the organization. For a full list of questions, please see Appendix I.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: Telling people things they do not know without fear of favour in a way that is easy to understand and contains one or all three of the following: educational, informative and entertaining.

Writer, Financial Times

3. Quality by numbers

The interviews produced about 22,000 words of talk about quality journalism, and I must say I was a bit overwhelmed after finishing the transcripts. The challenge was how to process the material in a way that would both allow the creation of some useful comparisons and generalizations, but also at the same time in a way that would preserve the individual voices and viewpoints, that are the whole point of doing qualitative research.

I wanted to choose an approach that would allow for a more structured way of comparing the ideas of quality journalism found in the interviews. I also wanted to find a way of presenting the material that would avoid the pitfall of some qualitative research, where the findings are reported as an endless stream of statements starting 'and the interviewee A said' with very little in the way of the big picture presented to the reader.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: Credible information that people will pay for.

Editor, Financial Times

3.1. Coding the material

The first step was to do a rough overview. In order to do a bit of numerical analysis the interviews were processed and coded to produce aggregate information about what kind of things or attributes the interviewees considered are important for quality journalism.

First, all claims or statements made about quality journalism were extracted from the interviews. These claims could come from many places, ranging from commentary on a single story to the more conceptually high-minded condensed definitions of quality journalism made at the end of each interview.

The statements ranged from clear and concise definitions ('Quality journalism must be accurate') to negative statements about what definitely is not quality journalism ('The stories in *The Daily Mail* will not give the broader background'). These negative statements were also informative, so they were included in the coding process, but in the interest of comparability they were converted into positive statements, so the previous example would be coded as 'quality journalism gives the broader background.'

As is typical with semi-structured interviews, many interviewees said the same thing many times using different words, for example an interviewee might first mention 'accuracy' and later on 'getting your facts right' as attributes of quality journalism. These redundancies were removed before coding the statements.

It must be noted that this process of pruning was used only to remove statements where the interviewee was referring to exactly the same thing many times; if the interviewee was first referring to factual accuracy in the narrow sense and then to accuracy in a wider, more philosophical sense these were coded as two separate 'votes' for accuracy as an attribute of quality. This means that even though there

were 14 interviews, some attributes, such as accuracy can get more than 14 mentions in the final coding.

After this process I ended up with 114 statements about quality journalism, with each individual interview yielding between six and eleven statements.

The statements were coded using a four-step framework presented below. The idea at this point was to roughly divide the statements about quality journalism into those concerning individual stories and texts and those dealing with the higher principles of journalism, such as public interest. Some of the story-level statements concerned objective attributes of the story, such as factual accuracy. Others were more subjective matters of opinion, such as humour. To reflect this, the story-level statements were split into two categories: the subjective and the objective.

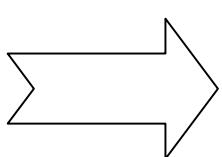
Those were the most numerous, but there were also some statements concerning the journalistic process, meaning the way journalism is produced. Additionally there were statements about the higher aspects and functions of quality journalism, such as its ability to provide information that is in the public interest. These were coded as separate categories. The end-result was a coding framework presented below.

Category	Description	Examples, quality journalism is...
JO1	Subjective story-level attributes	Humorous, well written, interesting

JO2	Objective story-level attributes	Factually correct, exclusive, provides context and background
PR	Attributes of the journalistic process	Double sourced, access to original material, anonymous
LAA	Higher functions of journalism	Public interest, critical attitude

The following example shows how the coding proceeds from a passage of text from the transcribed interview to three different coded attributes of quality journalism.

'You give everyone a fair opportunity to have their say on the story, write it in as punchy a way and to as broad a readership as possible. Those are the features I would define as quality journalism that we would stress when bringing younger journalists to the paper.'



Give everyone their say → IMPARTIAL → PR, process
 Write it in punchy way → WELL WRITTEN → JO1, story-level, subjective
 Write it to as broad readership as possible →
 ACCESSIBLE → JO2, story-level, objective

Dividing attributes of good journalism into the objective and the subjective wasn't always straightforward. One of the problematic areas was the quality of writing, an often-mentioned attribute of quality journalism.

In a sense it is an objective quality of a story, a well-written piece conforms to a set of rules about grammar and punctuation, for example. Good writing goes beyond just

being grammatically correct, however, and this is where we enter more subjective territory. Matters of style are always debatable, and more distinctive the style of the writer, the stronger opinions for and against it is likely to generate.

My sense from the interviews was that people talking about the quality of writing meant something going beyond using grammatically correct sentences and never splitting the infinitive, so when coding I placed good writing in category J01, the subjective attributes of individual stories.

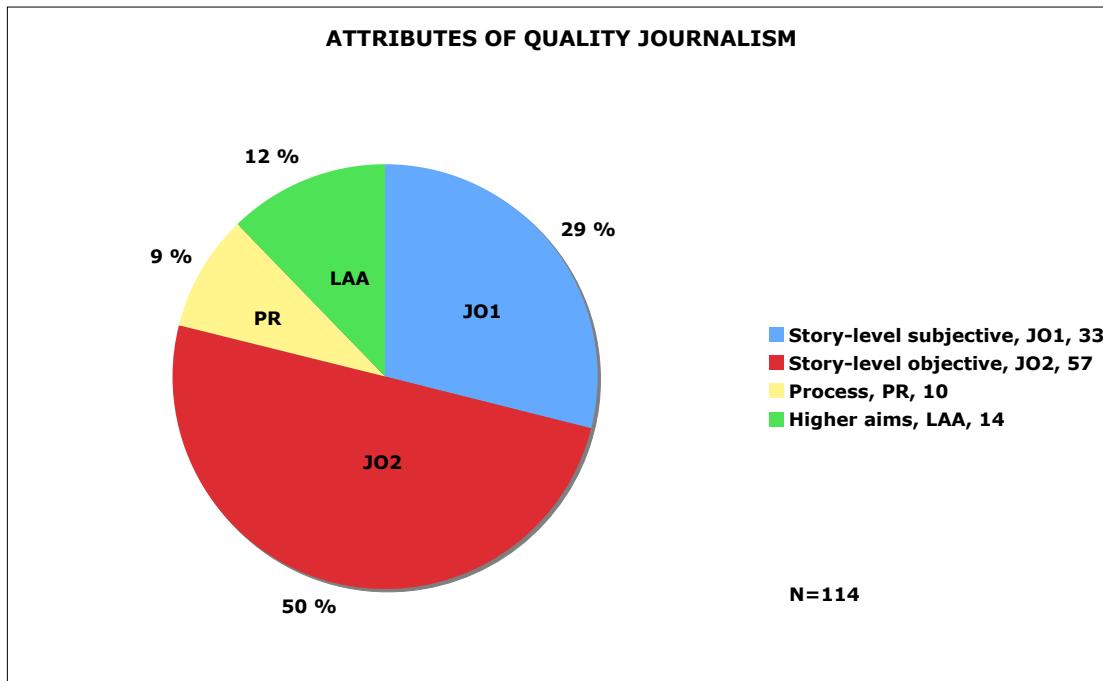
Q: Define quality journalism?

A: Gosh, I would just say well presented, well argued and well informed stories about current issues. Political but also economical, that would be what I am looking for.

Editor, The Economist

3.2. Results

The coding itself was a fairly low-tech process involving different colour magic-markers and piles of printouts. Results of the initial coding are presented in the chart below:



Some interesting patterns emerge. First of all, these results show that the interviewee's ideas about quality journalism are very much grounded in practice. In total 88 percent, or 100 of the 114 statements, can be categorized as belonging to the three most concrete categories that deal with journalistic process (PR) or subjective (JO1) and objective (JO2) attributes of individual stories.

The more idealistic, almost philosophical dimensions of journalistic quality, such as public interest and societal impact, are included in the category LAA. Only 12 percent of all statements about journalistic quality were in this category. Additionally it should be mentioned that six of the fourteen interviewees did not mention any attributes of quality journalism that could be categorized as belonging to this group, while all the people interviewed mentioned

at least one attribute that belonged to the most concrete category JO2.

This result was somewhat surprising. When the concept of quality is used in defending the usefulness of journalism (such as in examples quoted in the beginning of Chapter 1), it is usually at least implicitly very much connected to the higher ideals of quality journalism, for example those of public interest and the press acting as a watchdog. In the interviews, however, these ideas seem to be very much in minority.

One factor explaining this is that in the interviews the concept of quality journalism was approached from a practical viewpoint, with interviewees asked to comment examples taken from newspapers, and all in all define quality from their own practical standpoint.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: It is difficult to give just one definition, there are so many kinds of quality, but maybe it is placing a meaningful thing in context in a way that the facts are accurate and the story is a joy to read.

4. What are the important things?

The coding in the previous chapter divides the attributes of quality journalism into very rough categories. In the process of coding the statements there emerged a strong sense of homogeneity in the views about quality journalism. The interviews were semi-structured to give people as much freedom as possible to define quality journalism. No ready-made definitions were offered, so basically interviewees were quite free to define quality journalism in any way they saw fit. Despite of this 'freedom of movement', many of the interviewees were thinking along very much the same lines, saying the same things, sometimes using almost the same words.

The next step was to flesh out these similarities further by looking a bit more closely at the 114 statements about quality journalism gathered for coding as explained in Chapter 3. Again the challenge was to code the material in a way that finds the commonalities that exist in the statements about quality journalism, but does not try to be overly simplistic and steamroll over the sometimes subtle differences in the material.

For example, it is quite easy to decide that both the statement A: quality journalism 'is telling people what they are actually interested' and B: quality journalism 'captures people's attention' should both be coded as quality journalism is interesting. But does the statement C: quality journalism is 'providing reader with the joy of understanding' mean the same thing? In my opinion, not.

A closer look at the contents of the four rough categories follows.

JO1 Subjective story-level statements, 33 (29 % of all statements)

Most popular attributes	Times mentioned ¹	Percent of all ²
1. Well written	8	24%
2. Interesting	7	21%
3. Visual	5	15%
Least popular attributes		
1. Provides joy of understanding	1	3%
2. Provides new experience to the reader	1	3%
3. Emotionally touching	1	3%

¹ This tells us how many times the attribute was found in all the interviews

² This tells us what percentage of all statements fall in this category

First of all let's examine more closely the three most popular attributes in this category: well written, interesting and visual.

The most striking thing about these attributes is that they are all optional. And not optional in just one but in two ways, or in two dimensions. A piece can have all these attributes and not be quality journalism, but on the other hand a piece can lack at least two of these attributes and still be very much quality journalism. I think this fact is

closely connected with the subjective nature of these attributes.

A piece that is sublimely written (good writing), highly interesting (interesting) and compellingly presented (visual) can still be a total failure as a piece of journalism, if it is based on false information, for example.

A second example of the optional nature of these attributes might be a groundbreaking scoop about MPs' expenses that would be considered quality journalism even if it was written somewhat sloppily, splitting a few infinitives, and illustrated with a stock photograph of Big Ben. Indeed publications like *The New Yorker* or *The Economist* rarely dazzle with the visual presentation of their articles, yet they are widely considered to be of high journalistic quality.

When it comes to the attribute 'interesting', the case is less clear. Can a piece of journalism that is completely uninteresting be still considered quality journalism? It can be argued that providing new information on MPs' expenses automatically makes the story interesting to some people at least. But not everyone will agree, so this once again illustrates the very subjective nature of the attributes in this category.

So the fundamental aspect of all the attributes in this category is that they are optional.

When looking at the numbers it seems this category was fairly homogenous, meaning there was quite high agreement on the attributes, with many people mentioning the same things. In total there were 13 different attributes of quality journalism that were coded as belonging to this category. The three most popular of them alone formed over 60% of all statements in this category.

Humour was in my opinion surprisingly important, as it got mentions from three interviewees almost making it to the list of three most popular attributes.

Of the total attributes belonging to this category, five (quality journalism 'provides reader with the joy of understanding', reports an 'experience to reader they will never otherwise have', is 'emotionally touching', is 'stuff I would read') were unique, meaning they came up in only one of the 14 interviews.

A further eight attributes were mentioned by at least two of the people interviewed, with quality of writing getting mentions from eight of the 14 interviewees. This was in my opinion a surprisingly low percentage - maybe people take good writing as a given to such an extent that they do not even think of mentioning it.

Once again, this is a feature of open questions, if I had asked, 'Is good writing an attribute of quality journalism?', most likely 100 % of the interviewees would have agreed. In a semi-structured interview with open questions this is not the case.

JO2 Objective article-level statements, 60 (52% of all statements)

Most popular attributes	Times mentioned¹	Percent of all²
1. Accurate	22	37%
2. Provides new information	13	23%
3. Provides context / background	7	12%
Least popular attributes		
1. Anonymous	1	2%
2. Fast	1	2%
3. Is made from the individual's viewpoint	1	2%

¹ This tells us how many times the attribute was found in all the interviews

² This tells us what percentage of all statements fell in this category

As with the previous category, most of the popular attributes in this section are optional in two ways. According to the interviewees, new information is an attribute of quality journalism, but it is feasible that a piece containing very little or no new information can still be considered quality, if it is sublimely well written, for example. And a hard news story can get away with containing very little in the way of context or background, if it provides new information.

The one exception to all this optionality is accuracy; it is also optional, but only in one dimension. A piece can be accurate and not be quality journalism; consider for example the endless stories in Finnish tabloids on the minutiae of events taking place in the Big Brother

television series. But a piece can not be inaccurate and still be considered quality journalism.

It is interesting to note how few non-optional attributes emerged in the interviews. It seems quality journalism is a multi-dimensional structure, where a failure in one aspect can almost always be offset by a success in another aspect and the result can still be considered high quality journalism. This hints at the dark possibility that quality journalism is such a fundamentally subjective concept that it becomes a very poor tool in making any kind of value judgements at all.

The special nature of accuracy is supported by the fact that it proved to be the one attribute of quality journalism that almost all (13 of the 14) interviewees mentioned at some point. It means that 90% of the respondents spontaneously mentioned accuracy as a component of quality journalism. It also got by far the most mentions, 19 in all, when counting all the different aspects of accuracy. These different levels of accuracy are discussed further in Chapter 5.

In this category the top three attributes got almost 70% of all mentions, but after this the views start to be very scattered.

It is interesting that speed, which at least in online journalism is considered very important, was only mentioned once in all the interviews as being a component of quality journalism. Timing in a wider sense got two mentions, but in those cases the interviewees were not concerned with

being the first with news, but rather publishing articles that were connected with current events.

Besides speed three other attributes were only mentioned once in the interviews. These were quality journalism 'presents the story from an individual's viewpoint', 'helps understand the nature of reality' and 'is written anonymously'. The last one comes from *The Economist*, naturally.

PR Statements about the journalistic process, 10 (9% of all statements)

Most popular attributes	Times mentioned¹	Percent of all²
1. Double sourced	2	20%
2. Reporter has access to original sources	2	20%
3. Produced with professional integrity	2	20%
Least popular attributes		
1. Reporter has to be there	1	10%
2. Reporter has to understand the language	1	10%
3. Information is honestly obtained	1	10%

¹ This tells us how many times the attribute was found in all the interviews

² This tells us what percentage of all statements fell in this category

This category deals with the actual process of producing journalism. It is also a category where the statements start to be very heterogeneous and opinions differ greatly.

Only three attributes belonging to this category were mentioned by at least two of the 14 people interviewed, the others came up only once. None were mentioned by three interviewees, so this contrasts with accuracy in category JO2, which was mentioned by 13 of the 14 people interviewed.

All in all the aspects of quality journalism belonging to both this and the next category were not seen as very central and did not get many mentions from the interviewees, when compared to categories JO1 and JO2.

All the attributes belonging to these two final categories got a total of 22 mentions combined, which is as many as the one single most popular attribute in the previous category, namely accuracy.

LAA Statements about higher aims of journalism, 12 (8% of all statements)

Most popular attributes	Times mentioned¹	Percent of all²
1. Deals with subjects in the public interest	3	25%
2. Is done with a critical attitude	2	17%
3. Provides a watchdog function	2	17%
Least popular attributes		
1. Objective	1	3%
2. Is investigative	1	3%
3. Is meaningful in the reader's	1	3%

life		
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¹ This tells us how many times the attribute was found in all the interviews

² This tells us what percentage of all statements fall in this category

This is the category that deals with the higher aims and more philosophical attributes of quality journalism. The answers here are also somewhat fragmented, as in the previous category, with one attribute mentioned by three of the 14 people interviewed and the rest getting two or one mentions. In total, eight of the 14 interviewees mentioned some attributes of quality journalism that belong to this category, which is more than with the attributes dealing with the journalistic process, but far less than with either of the categories having to do with story-level attributes of quality journalism.

It is interesting to note that objectivity, which is often listed as a key attribute of quality journalism, was only mentioned in one interview. Perhaps it is due to the complicated and controversial nature of objectivity in journalism that the interviewees rather framed the concept in terms of accuracy and balance, for example.

All in all this chapter has been about arranging the pieces, sifting through the different attributes that the interviewees think form quality journalism. The further the process goes, the smaller the pieces get, meaning there is less and less agreement among the interviewees.

Finally, it is worthwhile to go back to the whole and check what kind of picture emerges when the pieces are combined.

This can be done by checking what the definition of quality journalism would look like if it were assembled from the two most popular attributes in each of the four categories (JO1, JO2, PR and LAA):

'Quality journalism is interesting and well written articles that contain new and accurate information. Quality journalism is double-sourced and produced with professional integrity; it is done with a critical attitude and deals with subjects that are in the public interest.'

The end-result is admittedly not the most compact of definitions, but it seems to contain elements that conform to most of the traditional textbook notions of what journalism in general or quality-journalism in particular should be. Once again it should be noted that most of elements in the definition are optional.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: Current news that are accurate, touching and that help understand the nature of reality.

Editor, Suomen Kuvailehti

5. The two kinds of accuracy

As seen in the last chapter, according to the interviews the most important attribute of quality journalism was by far accuracy, or 'getting it right'. Of the 14 people interviewed 13 mentioned at some point of the interview accuracy as a component of journalistic quality.

Accuracy was seen as equally important in interviews done both in Finland and in England, in interviews done at broadsheets, tabloids and newsmagazines and across all three groups of people interviewed, namely writers, editors and publishers.

The importance of accuracy is consistent with previous research in the field, such as Leo Bogart's 1977 survey of over 700 newspaper editors in the US¹². In that survey accuracy emerged as the most important attribute of quality reporting.¹³ Bogart's survey was done almost 35 years ago, so it seems that despite many changes in the field, accuracy has kept its role as the touchstone of quality journalism.

The importance of accuracy is further strengthened by the fact that these were spontaneous mentions in open interviews, as the interviewees did not pick accuracy from a ready-made list of different qualities of high quality journalism. For example, Bogart's method was to produce a

¹² Bogart 1989, 258

¹³ Ibid.

list of attributes for quality journalism and have respondents grade them by the order of importance.

The open interviews meant, however, that the results do not expressly tell whether the interviewees think that accuracy is the one most important attribute of quality journalism. Despite this, the central importance of accuracy is reflected in the comments made by the interviewees:

'The very first of quality journalism or indeed any journalism must be that it is accurate. That comes before anything else.'

Editor, *The Sun*

'The one thing is absolute factual accuracy.'

Writer, *The Economist*

In some interviews accuracy was also expressly placed before other attributes of quality journalism, such as speed:

'I think we have always been extremely conscientious of getting a story right rather than getting it first.'

Editor, *Financial Times*

'You are more likely to have a problem with the editor because you have had some facts and figures wrong than if you have missed a scoop, if somebody else gets it.'

Writer, *Financial Times*

So the idea of getting your facts right is widely shared and in no dispute, but when looking at accuracy closely the picture seems more nuanced. In the British interviews the editors and journalists interviewed from both the *Financial Times* and *The Economist* differentiated between narrow

factual accuracy and a wider idea of presenting a balanced view of the story reported.

'Another thing is a real intellectual commitment to the truth in a broader sense. I like to think that even if someone does not agree with my analysis in a broader sense they would have to accept that I have presented the facts in the argument. We don't go down this way of polemical journalism --- it is very lazy and depends on the misleading elision of things.'

Writer, The Economist

In this view of journalism you can get the facts right and still get the story wrong, presenting an incomplete or distorted view of the subject reported. Some interviewees saw this as a problem especially with the British tabloid press:

'*Daily Mail* is not what I would call quality journalism. I think its coverage is far too informed by what I would call its prejudice. --- typically they will find one or two people to support their story but they will not really tell you the broader background in any detail at all.'

Editor, The Economist

This factually correct, but in a wider sense deficient form of journalism reverses the classical journalistic process, which starts from the facts and arrives at conclusions based on those facts. It starts from a ready-made conclusion and then starts to look for facts that will support this conclusion:

'The essential distinction between quality and non-quality journalism is whether the reporter tells the news desk what the story is, or the other way around. You can tell in our country which newspapers are which really by just reading the stories.'

Writer, Financial Times

The Finnish interviewees did not express this concern of 'journalism informed by its prejudice'. There was, however, a wide sense of context and background as being central elements of quality journalism. In my opinion this is also related to the more directly expressed British concerns about accuracy. You can accurately report the facts, but without context and background the view a reader gets can be very distorted.

The main difference between the British and the Finnish views was that the British interviewees saw this distortion as more of a deliberate thing, done by choice, but the Finnish interviewees were more concerned about a lack of context in general. This could be due to lack of time or editorial ambition, not necessarily because of some active intention of misleading the readers.

If we compare Britain and Finland, in Finland the tabloids are far less opinionated, or 'informed by its prejudice'. An example: in reporting climate change a newspaper 'informed by its prejudice' might actively choose to push results of scientifically unsound research, if those results fit its chosen agenda.

Another newspaper might publish the same results prominently not because of some nefarious agenda, but rather because of a failure to set the results in a proper context. The end-result in both cases is the same: poorly informed readers.

6. 'We are very British about it': how do you know what is quality?

In Chapter 4 it was noted that the interviewees ended up presenting extremely homogenous views of quality journalism, considering that the research interviews gave people a chance to formulate their views pretty much the way they wanted.

One of the things I wanted to explore in the interviews was how journalistic organizations transfer and propagate the idea of what quality means for that particular organization. If you accept the idea that quality is a central concept for newspapers that want to succeed, it would seem that it is also central that you have to:

1. Have a definition of what quality means for you and
2. Also have some method of transferring that definition to new people joining your organization.

In general it is somewhat difficult to try to reach a goal (quality) if no one tells you exactly what that goal is. Because of this some industries go to great lengths to spell out what quality means for them. Extreme examples of this process of definition are the ISO-standards, which define very carefully the step-by-step process required to produce an outcome of the desired quality.¹⁴ In the ISO-standards the focus is as much on the process as the end-result.

¹⁴ http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/faq_standards_2.htm

ISO-standards were initially introduced for industrial manufacturing of objects, but were gradually adopted in other fields as well, such as services,¹⁵ A modern-day newspaper journalist sits in his or her office-chair, held together by screws conforming to ISO 68-1:1998 (ISO general purpose screw threads)¹⁶, typing away at the ISO/IEC 9995-1:2009 (Keyboard layouts for text and office systems)¹⁷ compliant keyboard and produces text, which will be printed according to rules set out in ISO 12647-3:2005 (Process control for the production of half-tone colour separations, proofs and production prints)¹⁸.

But for the content s/he produces, the journalism or quality journalism, there is no ISO-standard. When going through the research-interviews it was very easy to figure out why. First the interviewees were simply asked if somebody had ever presented them with a statement defining what quality journalism means for that particular organization. The answers were interesting:

'Not really.'

Editor, The Economist

'No. That was never discussed, not when I got here, not later on.'

¹⁵ http://www.iso.org/iso/about/discover-iso_what-standards-do.htm
¹⁶

¹⁷ http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=3707

¹⁸ http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=51645

¹⁸ http://www.iso.org/iso/iso_catalogue/catalogue_tc/catalogue_detail.htm?csnumber=39480

Writer, *Iltalehti*

'No we do not have any prescribed rules written down, we do not have at all.'

Editor, *The Sun*

'Not really. When I first started out I did get a piece of paper, but it was more practical things. Higher principles, that we are independent and so on, not a check-list of what quality consists of.'

Writer, *Helsingin Sanomat*

'We are very British about it. It is implicit rather than explicit.'

Writer, *The Economist*

'No, but we do have a code of journalism laying out the processes of writing and acquiring news-stories. I have never seen one but I am sure there is one. I have heard of it.'

Writer, *The Sun*

According to the interviews none of the six journalistic organizations in the project had formulated a definition of what quality journalism means for them. It should be kept in mind this group includes two newspapers that are globally considered to be top-quality (*Financial Times* and *The Economist*), and two that are considered high quality in their home markets (*Helsingin Sanomat* and *Suomen Kuvailehti*). Furthermore none of the editors or writers interviewed had ever even worked for a journalistic organization that had such a formal definition of quality.

Most of the writers and editors actually saw it as a bad idea to have a clear definition of quality journalism for their organization. The most common view was that it would simply have no impact:

'You don't run by a code anyway, do you? Can you dictate that by having a piece of paper you have quality?'

Writer, The Sun

'I am not sure it would make a lot of difference.'

Editor, Financial Times

One editor thought it could actually end up being counterproductive, because any explicitly spelled-out definition of quality journalism would inevitably end up being too restrictive:

'It (having a in-house definition of quality journalism) would be dangerous... It would rule out those surprises and anomalies that can mean a leap forward for journalistic quality. If the idea is that you would just have a checklist and if you tick all the boxes the result is automatically quality.'

Editor, Suomen Kuvalehti

Those seeing an explicit in-house definition of good journalism as a useful concept were very much in the minority. One of these few voices of dissent came from *Helsingin Sanomat*:

'We have not discussed sufficiently what quality is for our editorials, politics or business coverage. And is that quality measured in a meaningful way--- We are not doing enough with this, but we do have a project where the goal is to define what quality means for us.'

Editor, Helsingin Sanomat

The other newspaper which was in the process of adopting not necessarily a definition of quality, but some formal

guidelines for producing quality journalism was the *Financial Times*:

'We are actually in the process of updating it (the FT Style Guide) into a more general handbook --- The handbook will outline what are the quality issues and what we expect of a story, accuracy, way they are written, how they are presented, what our values are.'

Editor, Financial Times

It is worth noting that according to the interviews, the FT has in place some formal rules governing the journalistic process that also have a strong effect on the quality of journalism. The newspaper insists that stories must be double-sourced, meaning the claims made in a news-story must be confirmed by two independent sources.

'---all our stories have to be double sourced, we also try very hard not to rely on anonymous sources, but especially in the business-world it is unavoidable sometimes. Double-sourcing was not necessarily part of my old life working at *The Telegraph*, but here I have come to realize that it really is the essence, I think.'

Writer, Financial Times

This concept actually introduces into the journalistic process the idea familiar from ISO-standards: you get the desired end result (accuracy) by making rigid rules (all news stories must have two sources) regulating the process used to 'manufacture' that result.

As explored in Chapter 4, accuracy is seen as the most important component of quality journalism. The idea of double-sourcing is by now means a revelatory new journalistic innovation; even in the absence of strict rules most journalists will probably try to double-source

at least more controversial news and steer away from anonymous sources.

By absolutely insisting on double-sourcing in all cases you probably will end up losing some scoops to competitors, because double-sourcing them has not been possible. The upside is that you will get more accurate news, or higher quality journalism, by regulating the journalistic process than by just committing yourself to a general idea of accuracy and then letting individual journalists figure out how they try to achieve that aim.

The example of double sourcing shows that even if you 'don't run by a code' as a journalist quoted above thinks, some aspects of journalistic quality can be codified into rules. When those rules are followed, the quality of journalism increases.

These aspects are very much in the minority, however. Most components of journalistic quality identified in this research cannot be easily governed by formal rules. They are what management consultants like to call tacit knowledge, a concept explored more fully in the next chapter.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: It is definable but not what people think it is. It is not august prose, heavy duty reading. It is producing what people want to know.

Writer, The Sun

7. 'You kind of grow into it': How is quality taught and learned?

The aversion towards formal definitions of quality is closely linked to the question of how journalists learn to do a good job, namely produce quality journalism. In this regard the vocabulary used by the interviewees is telling.

Answers to the question how new employees learn what journalistic quality means can be divided into roughly two groups. The first one subscribes to the idea that quality is 'instinctively understood', when you recruit the right kind of people you will get quality.

'When the FT takes on someone from the outside they want to be absolutely sure that you are someone who conforms to their idea of what makes proper journalism.'

Writer, Financial Times

'I think we all instinctively understand what we are all about here. This is a newspaper that attracts the best. People come here to measure themselves against the best journalists. And people here are all after the same thing, which is to beat the stuffing out of the rivals, not to put too fine a point upon it.'

Writer, The Economist

The second, much bigger group thinks that you learn what quality is by doing journalism, not by reading a written definition, set of rules or a recipe. These interviewees say that quality is 'born within the editorial office', 'gradually absorbed', 'learned by doing', 'passed down from colleagues', 'learned on the job', it is something a journalist 'grows into' or 'catches on quite quickly'.

These definitions place the concept of quality journalism very firmly in the realm of tacit knowledge. This concept of tacit knowledge, very crudely defined as knowledge that cannot be put into words, was first developed by Michael Polanyi, a polymath with interests in chemistry, economics and mathematics and, incidentally, a Fellow of Merton College, Oxford.

The idea was initially a part of Polanyi's theorizing in the field of theory of knowledge published in 1950s in his book *Personal Knowledge*.¹⁹ Tacit knowledge was by no means central to Polanyi's theory of knowledge and he used the term in a very abstract and difficult way. The idea really started to gain traction in the field of management studies in 1995 when two Japanese university-professors, Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, published a book called *The Knowledge-Creating Company*.²⁰

In the book the two professors developed Polanyi's ideas into a much more practical direction. They see the ability to develop tacit knowledge and transfer it into explicit (written) knowledge as the key to the success of Japanese companies, such as Canon and Honda.

In *The Knowledge-Creating Company* tacit knowledge is defined as knowledge that is 'highly personal and hard to formalize, making it difficult to communicate or share with others.'²¹ This fits very well with the ideas about quality

¹⁹ Polanyi, 1964.

²⁰ Nonaka, 1995.

²¹ Nonaka 1995, 8.

journalism the professionals expressed in the research-interviews.

The authors also explore how tacit knowledge can be taught, or transferred within an organization. They identify several different modes of transfer, one of which is tacit. This can only happen through observation, imitation and practice, in a similar way that an apprentice learns from a master:

'Apprentices work with their masters and learn craftsmanship not through language but through observation, imitation and practice'.²²

One of the characteristics of this type of learning is that you learn from your mistakes rather than from your successes. This mind-set is probably familiar to anyone who has worked in a newspaper and it also came up in the interviews:

'I think quality is not discussed as much as lack of quality. When a shoddy piece of journalism gets in to the paper or on the web, we react to that probably more so than praise and try to spread the lessons from when we do really good stuff. We try to learn more from our mistakes than we do from our successes.'

Editor, Financial Times

'There is a Darwinian process: ideas we do not like don't get commissioned, articles we do not like get written but not edited, and even after they are edited the business-editor for example may spike them. If they get printed and the editor then complains that I do not think we should have run that, there are very strong negative feedback mechanisms.'

²² Ibid, 62

Writer, *The Economist*

This Darwinian process of negative reinforcement is consistent with Robert Picard's observation that in journalism 'quality tends to be defined not by its presence but its absence- defining good quality is difficult but bad quality? You know it when you see it.'²³

Most interviewees see the learning by doing still as a viable model. Interestingly, the exceptions are *Financial Times* and *The Economist*, where the models of learning by doing or instinctively understanding quality are in the process of being re-examined. This due to two factors: the size of the organization and the increasing heterogeneity (both geographical and cultural) of the new journalists hired to work for the organization.

'In the old days everyone starting at the FT would first work in London, they would absorb the culture, desks or editors would be able to instruct very carefully what was expected of them--- We frankly have not been particularly good at spreading that value system throughout our global network, so we need to do a bit more work on trying to focus on what our core values are. We are now just expecting people to absorb them, which they maybe could have done some 15 years ago, when they would have learned by doing.'

Editor, *Financial Times*

'---I would like to see more mentoring, helping new journalists. We used to have a very strong common culture. Most people who came had not only been to the same university but also the same college and read the same subject. --- Now we have widened a lot and people coming from other countries can find it quite difficult, we do not do enough to show them how to do it.'

²³ Picard, 2000, 97.

Writer, The Economist

Nonaka and Takeuchi base their theorizing on case studies done in Japanese manufacturing companies, but according to these interviews the ideas derived from appliance or auto-manufacturing seem to fit extremely well with the work done in newspapers and magazines. These ideas feed into the age-old debate about the nature of good journalism.

Is it closer to art, in the sense that it is difficult to define or compress into a set of rules, and difficult to learn except by doing it? Or is it closer to a manufacturing process, which can be governed by a set of rules and which produces an end-result that conforms to a set of criteria and can be evaluated and deemed to be either quality journalism or not?

Traditionally journalists themselves sit very firmly entrenched in the art camp, while the management side occasionally tries to drag them more to the manufacturing side, often with very limited success.

In my opinion, the truth is probably somewhere between those two extreme positions.

Some aspects of journalistic quality can be codified into rules, meaning not all journalism can only be produced by this almost magical process, which defies all attempts to define it. This applies even to some forms of journalism that can be considered to be very high quality.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: An exclusive, revelatory, possibly shocking story wonderfully written, brilliantly displayed.

Editor, The Sun

8. Contrast and compare

'Shock and amaze on every page.'

The motto of *The Sun*

'To take part in a severe contest between intelligence, which presses forward, and an unworthy, timid ignorance obstructing our progress.'

The motto of *The Economist*

When I first started thinking about doing a research-project on views of quality journalism I thought that the most interesting material would emerge from the comparisons, for example between Britain and Finland and between newspapers and magazines situated at very much the opposite ends of the journalistic field, such as *The Sun* and *The Economist*.

If one leafs through those two publications at the local newsagent, it is rather difficult to confuse *The Sun* with *The Economist*. So when the end result is so different, surely the views on quality behind the journalism and also the ethos guiding the journalists working in those papers must be very different as well?

The further I got with the research the less sure I was that this was the case. When transcribing the actual interviews I was struck not by the differences, but rather the similarities in the views expressed about quality journalism. A telling example comes from the interviews of a journalist working at *The Economist* and a journalist working at *The Sun*:

'When I write something, I always feel it can be shorter.'

Writer, *The Economist*

'What we have to do is to squeeze what the broadsheets would put into a quart into a pint pot.'

Writer, *The Sun*

'It has to be beautifully written with quite a few jokes in it.'

Writer, *The Economist*

'Where possible it has to have humour.'

Writer, *The Sun*

So writers at *The Sun* and *The Economist*, which should pretty much lie at the opposite ends of the journalistic spectrum, seem to share at least some aspects of quality journalism and define them with almost exactly the same words: write succinctly and put some jokes in.

I did not want to be discouraged by this initial observation, but decided to compare the views of quality journalism a bit more systematically. I did two sets of comparisons, the first with views in Finland and England, the second between views expressed by people working in the dailies and magazines and people working in tabloids.

A quick caveat is in order. To make sense of the various views expressed, they are grouped in categories as done in Chapters 4 and 5. Though the approach is numerical, this

does not mean that the comparisons are valid in any strict quantitative sense.

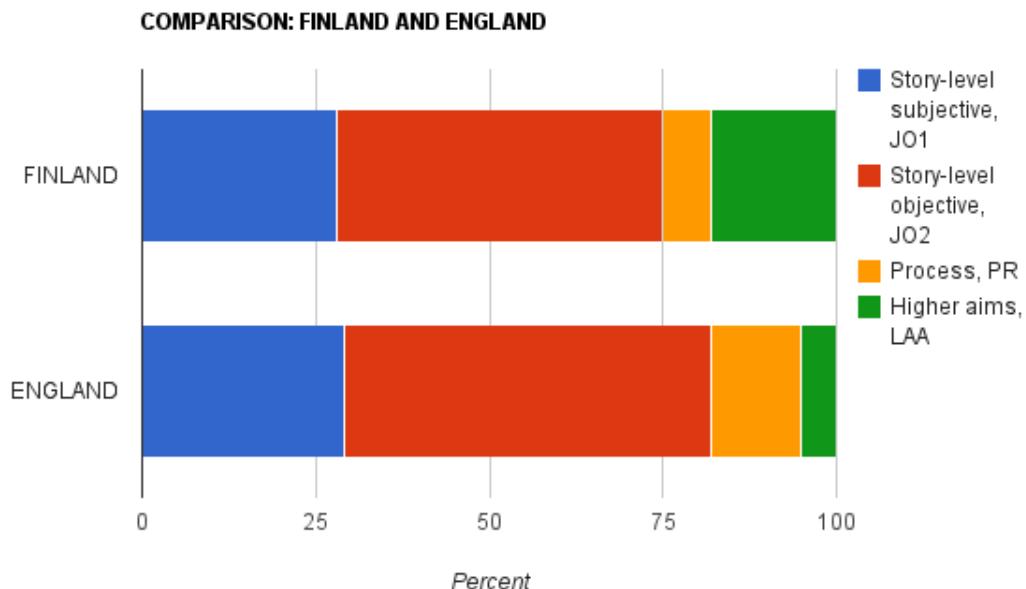
The comparison between England and Finland are based on two groups of seven people and in the second comparison the groups are even smaller. These groups are so small that no statistically meaningful comparisons can be drawn and no overarching generalizations, such as 'English journalists are not interested in the more ideological aspect of quality journalism', should be made.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: It is journalism that is interesting, and meaningful and relevant to the reader.

Editor, Iltalehti

8.1. Comparison 1: The Finns and the Brits



When looking at the two largest categories, JO1 and JO2, both the English and the Finnish ideas about quality journalism are very similar, almost identical. Most numerous were the objective statements that operate at the level of individual stories (JO2) with the subjective story-level statements (JO1) the second-biggest category.

More interesting is what happens in the two smaller categories, the statements about the journalistic process (PR) and the statements about the higher aims of quality journalism (LAA).

The Finnish interviewees were far more concerned about the aspects of quality journalism belonging to the category

LAA. All three editors and two of the three writers interviewed mentioned attributes of quality journalism that were coded as belonging to this category. In the English interviews only one of the three writers and two of the three editors mentioned any aspects of quality journalism that can be characterised as belonging to this category.

When looking more closely at the higher aims that received more attention in the Finnish interviews, the most popular was the claim that quality journalism provides information that "has value to society" (literal translation). This aspect of quality was mentioned by a third of the Finnish interviewees, and in almost identical words, but by none of the British ones, which makes an interesting contrast.

The Brits were far more concerned with the practical, almost down to earth aspects of quality journalism, the ones coded in the category PR. The aspects of quality mentioned include double-sourcing articles, having foreign news done by journalists who are actually there and speak the local language and, interestingly enough in the light of recent events in *The News of the World*, honestly obtaining stories.

The following table lists what were seen as the most important attributes of quality journalism in the English and the Finnish interviews:

Comparison: the most often mentioned attributes of quality	
England	Finland

	Share ¹	Category		Share ¹	Category
1. Accuracy	25%	JO2	Accuracy	14%	JO2
2. New information	13%	JO2	New information	11%	JO2
3. Good writing	9%	JO1	Provides context	9%	JO2
4. Interesting	7%	JO1	Good writing	7%	JO1
5. Provides context	5%	JO2	Visual	7%	JO1

¹ As percentage of all statements about quality journalism made in the interviews.

Accuracy is the most important aspect of quality journalism for both nationalities, but it should be noted that it was mentioned markedly more often in the English interviews. This has to do with the fact that the British interviewees were more concerned about accuracy in a wider sense, not just getting your facts right but giving the reader a balanced and complete picture. For more discussion about this, see Chapter 6.

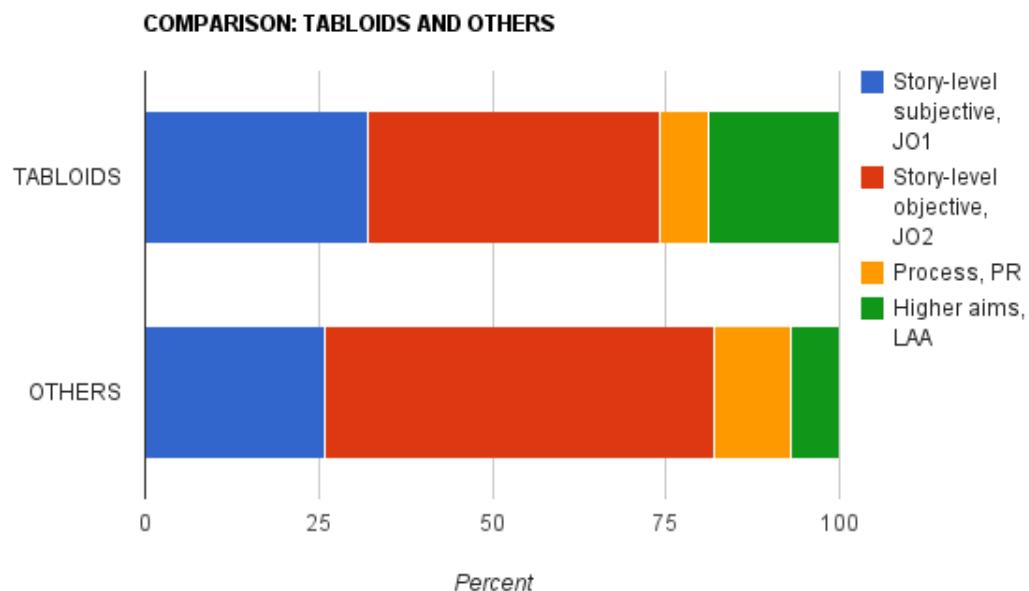
With the other aspects in the list the Brits did not see visual excellence as a central aspect of quality journalism. On the other hand for the Finns the idea that quality journalism should be interesting did not make it into the top five aspects of quality journalism.

Q: Define quality journalism?

A: It is trustworthy, well written reporting about people and subjects that feel meaningful and relevant for the reader's own life.

Editor, Helsingin Sanomat

8.2. Comparison 2: Tabloids and others



Here also the objective-story level statements were the biggest group followed by story-level subjective statements. The more interesting differences are to be found in the two smaller categories.

Somewhat surprisingly it seems that when defining quality journalism the people working at the tabloids are more idealistic than their counterparts at other papers. In tabloids the third biggest group of attributes were the ones dealing with the higher aims of quality journalism (LAA).

The total number of interviews in the tabloid group was four, so I hesitate to make very far reaching conclusions. But if we look more closely at this group, a critical attitude of the journalists and a wider watchdog function of the press received two mentions in the tabloid interviews and none in the other ten interviews.

The interviewees in the group quality, or "other" newspapers were far less interested in the higher aims of journalism, with only seven percent of all attributes of quality mentioned coded as belonging in this group. The percentage of attributes concerning higher aims was almost three times higher for interviews done in tabloids, or 19 percent of all attributes.

The following table lists what were seen as the most important attributes of quality journalism in the interviews with people working in tabloids (*The Sun* and *Iltalehti*) and all other newspapers and magazines:

Comparison: the most often mentioned attributes of quality					
Tabloids			Others		
	Share ¹	Category		Share ¹	Category
1. New info	16%	JO2	Accuracy	21%	JO2
2. Interesting	13%	JO1	New info	9%	JO2
3. Accuracy	10%	JO2	Good writing	9%	JO1
4. Critical attitude	6%	LAA	Provides context	8%	JO2
5. Provides context	6%	JO2	Visual	3%	JO1

¹ As percentage of all statements about quality journalism made in the interviews.

The tabloids, perhaps because the paper must be sold each day, place a great premium on both providing new information and doing it in an interesting way.

'Nowadays the fact that a story is interesting is accepted as a news criteria in a way that was in some papers was unheard of 20 years ago for example.'

Editor, Iltalehti

In other newspapers' quality criteria, accuracy is elevated to the most important position, above providing new information, for example. The tabloid staple of providing stories that are interesting to the reader is not an attribute of quality that makes it to the top-five for other newspapers.

An interesting observation is that accuracy comes only third when measuring what share of mentions different attributes of quality received in the interviews. The attributes 'new information' and 'interesting' both were seen as more important than accuracy. Indeed one of the tabloid interviewees was the only one of all the 14 who did not mention accuracy at all.

It must be noted that the people interviewed from the tabloids also thought that accuracy is an important aspect of journalistic quality, even though it only comes in third place on the list of attributes of quality.

This discrepancy is due to the fact that the kind of wider and many-faceted thinking about different forms of accuracy was absent from the tabloid interviews. The tabloid people

interviewed were concerned with straight factual accuracy, not factual accuracy vs. presenting a truthful and nuanced picture of the subject, such as some people working in the broadsheets, for example. This means accuracy got fewer mentions and a lower percentage of all mentions than in the broadsheet interviews.

Q: Define quality journalism?

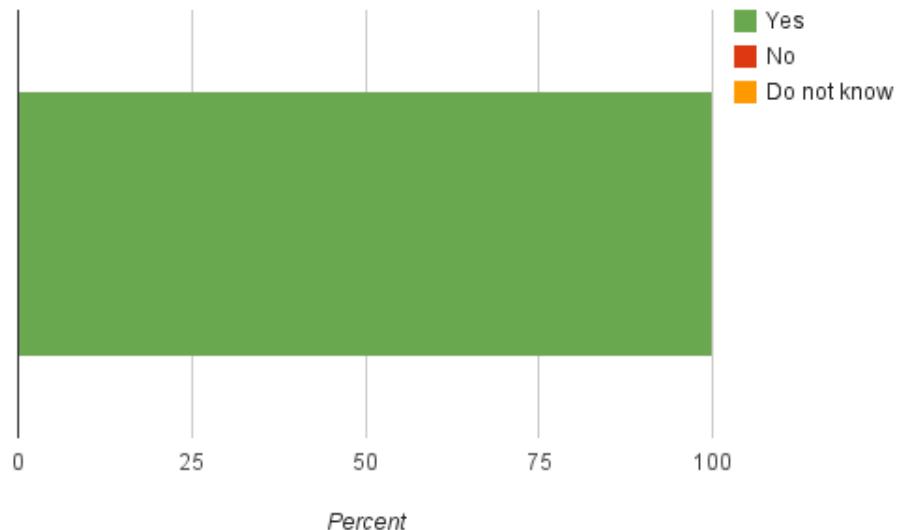
A: Maybe it is placing new information about a subject in the public interest to its proper context and explaining the effects that the new information has. Context and relevance are central. And it should be written in a way that is understandable to everyone.

9. The four claims about quality journalism

This section offers a brief overview of the results of the mini-survey, which was done at the end of each interview (see Chapter 2). The idea was to test how valid some of the basic claims concerning quality and the future of journalism are according to the people interviewed.

There were no major surprises in the results, so it would seem that the basic ideas about quality journalism are sound. The interviewees' opinions were also very homogenous, as in all four claims the more popular alternative got well over 80 percent of the answers.

Claim 1: People are still willing to pay for quality journalism



All interviewees agreed with the basic idea at the core of all the speeches about quality journalism and the future of news media: people are still willing to pay for quality. But on a closer look, things do not seem so rosy; most people interviewed had at least some caveats:

'The history of media shows that to be true. But only to some extent.'

Editor, Iltalehti

'Well we are finding that out as we speak.'

Writer, The Sun

'A small group of people is.'

Publisher, Suomen Kuvailehti

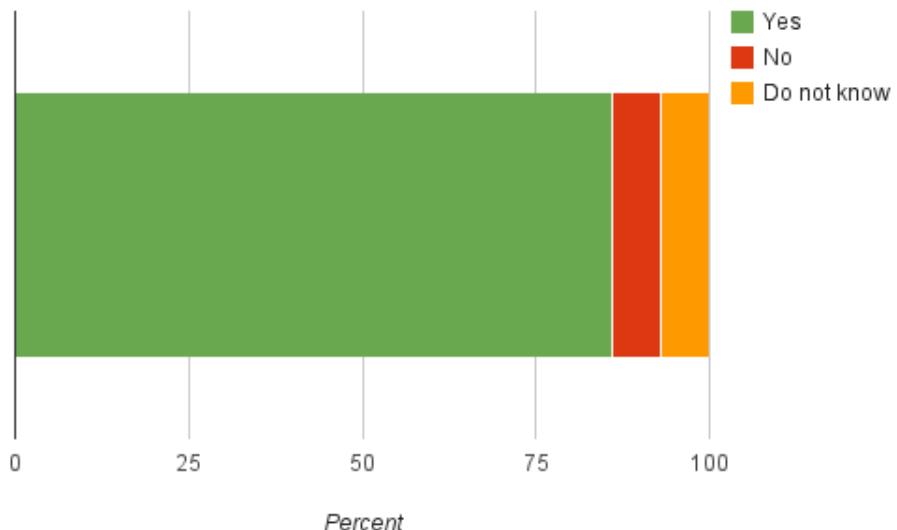
'Some people are, some people are not.'

Writer, Suomen Kuvailehti

'Absolutely.'

Publisher, The Economist

Claim 2: Decisions made in the business-side of operations threaten the quality of journalism



Almost all the people interviewed agreed in principle that the claim was true, even though most then quickly added that it did not at the moment apply to their own organizations:

'If the commercial pressures are too intense, that certainly does affect the editorial quality. We have been very lucky to have an owner who has absolutely not intervened in the editorial decisions and has been a very steady owner for many years.'

Editor, The Sun

'That could be true, if management decides that it will no longer invest in journalism. But luckily this company is not in that position.'

Editor,,The Economist

The biggest concern was that the managers making decisions about resources either completely fail to see the connection between quality and editorial resources or

misjudge the effect that incremental cuts have on the journalistic quality of the paper:

'From a business point of view it is always we can save a million pounds here and nobody will notice. Nothing happening in Japan, do we really need a correspondent there?'

Writer, The Economist

One stated reason for this disconnect was the lack of familiarity in the business-side about how quality journalism is done and the idea that a newspaper or - magazine can be run according to the same principles as any other business:

'(The managers are) ---people who have no experience in the field and do not necessarily understand how the journalistic process works. They can for example think that information gathering is just going to the internet and googling things and then writing them out.'

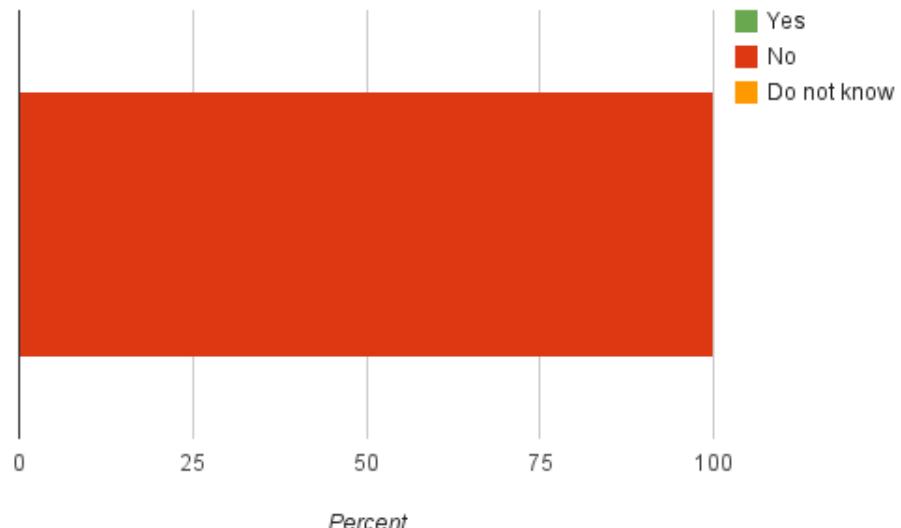
Writer, Suomen Kuvailehti

One interviewee felt that he had not been in his current job long enough to say whether the claim was true. The lone dissenting voice arguing that business decisions do not threaten the quality of journalism came from a publisher:

'When revenues and volumes in the magazine business are falling it is essential that the business side thinks carefully what are the decisions that enable us to maintain the quality of the product. They are difficult decisions, but one must think is it the number of pages, quality of the paper-stock, size of the editorial staff or maybe structure of the editorial office.'

Publisher, Suomen Kuvailehti

Claim 3: Lack of time makes it impossible to do quality journalism



As explained more closely in Chapter 2, this question was not very well formulated, so the yes/no answers did not address the concept of what impact the added workload and working for various outlets has on journalistic quality. Rather, it addresses the somewhat simplistic idea of whether it is ever possible to do quality journalism in a hurry.

Clumsy formulation of the question allowed the interviewees to dismiss it very quickly and not analyze the relationship of time and quality more closely. The comments offer some insight to the issue, however:

'No. But it massively increases the difficulty of doing so.'

Editor,
Financial Times

'But it increases the chance of misses and decreases the depth of reporting.'

Writer, Suomen Kuvalehti

'I think lack of time is an excuse. It does not stop you from doing quality journalism.'

Writer, Financial Times

'I think that is silly.'

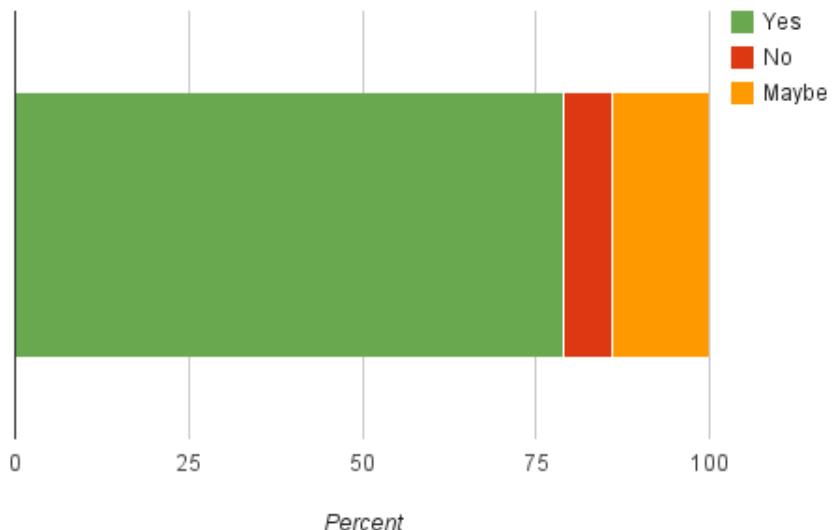
Publisher, The Economist

'Pace is also an energetic phenomena. In that sense pressure can be the generator of journalistic quality.'

Writer, The Sun

It should be noted that also in this question the choice of the media for the project strongly affected the result. All newspapers involved are fairly well resourced. So asking a journalist working in a Finnish regional newspaper or in a six stories a day online news desk would undoubtedly have provided different insights.

Claim 4: Quality journalism will save newspapers from the crisis they are in



This and Question 1 together are pretty much at the centre of all the recent talk about quality journalism and the crisis of newspapers: 'do quality and you will be saved'. The overwhelmingly positive response might have been due to the fact that none of the media chosen for the project were really struggling; in fact most of them were doing quite well.

A second explanation for the hopeful outlook is that all the interviewees were insiders, meaning editors, writers and publishers working in media organizations. Usually when problems of the business model for news are analyzed, the most critical voices tend to come from the outside. Maybe this is basic human nature, as it is difficult to admit that your chosen profession might be in terrible difficulties.

So all in all the respondents viewed the idea favourably, but as with the first claim there were caveats.

Even some of the people who basically agreed with this idea thought that the link between quality and success would only work in some instances, for example with business and economics journalism.

Newspapers which are undifferentiated are really going to struggle. You have to be really clear on the proposition you are making to your readers and then about how you are going to make people pay for it.'

Writer, Financial Times

'I am still not convinced that people can do it with general news and I have great doubts about the Times' paywall strategy, for example.'

Editor, The Economist

'I think you are going to get some. The middle is disappearing. The trashy mass-market will do fine, there is a market for that, and really upmarket journalism will do fine, particularly business-journalism. The problem is in the middle.'

Writer, The Economist

'I think there will always be room for high quality delivery of news about what is going on. But it is about content, not the channel of delivery. This can be a very confusing time for people concentrated just on the channel of delivery.'

Publisher, The Economist

Also the one interviewee disagreeing with this claim did see a link between success and quality, but not quality at any price. Even though this was the only interviewee disagreeing with the idea of quality as the saviour of newspapers in reality this reasoning is not that different

from people agreeing with the claim. The other interviewees just framed their answer in a more positive way:

'I do not think so. Quality that is produced with the resources that the revenues make possible, that might save newspapers. But not quality in and of itself.'

Publisher, Suomen Kuvailehti

10. Conclusions

My goal for this project was first and foremost to find out what journalists, editors and publishers think is quality journalism. What is the content of this term which is often used, but seldom defined?

I was perhaps a bit surprised to find that quality journalism is defined very much in practical terms. Nearly 90 percent of the 114 statements about quality journalism made in the interviews concerned the more practical aspects of journalism, such as accuracy and good writing.

The higher principles of journalism, which I thought would figure prominently in the research, were very much in the minority. Almost half of the interviewees mentioned no attributes of quality journalism that could be categorized as having to do with the higher principles of journalism. This is interesting because when quality journalism is mentioned as the saviour of the press, the concept is usually at least implicitly connected just to these higher ideals of journalism.

All in all, doing research on quality journalism has lead me to be more critical, perhaps even pessimistic about the idea that quality journalism will save newspapers or other media from their troubles with a dwindling audience or a damaged business model. The idea is very tempting and familiar from children's bedtime stories: 'do good and you will do well'. There are two major problems with this idea.

The first is that as was mentioned in the Introduction, there is very little actual evidence that doing quality journalism will save newspapers, if a) by saving we mean making them financially successful and b) we want to posit the connection of quality and success as a rule that works consistently, not just in some cases.

There are admittedly examples of newspapers, which are both successful and of a high quality, such as *The Financial Times*. It can be argued that the FT is an exception, because it provides financial information, a niche where the willingness to exchange money for information is stronger than elsewhere in the market. There are also some examples of generalist newspapers doing quite well, such as *The New York Times*. The NYT News Media Group, which includes the group's newspapers, posted a profit of US\$220 million in 2010.

But there are also very strong counterexamples, such as *The Guardian*, which, as mentioned previously, in 2010 lost £100,000 a day while doing the sort of journalism that very few people would deny is top-notch, or high quality. So if the rule becomes 'doing quality journalism might save some newspapers at least in some circumstances', it is not much of a rule anymore.

I'd like to believe that the link between success and quality exists, but it is not as simplistic as high quality equals success. One way to look at the equation is that because of new methods of distribution, such as the internet, the market for newspapers has become global.

It is now as easy to be in Helsinki and read *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* as the local newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*. So when I am looking for foreign coverage, for example, I choose the paper that does it the best - or has the highest quality journalism in foreign reporting. This means more opportunities for the publications that the consumers consider to be of the highest quality in their markets - but only for those. I would argue that this explains the success of *The Economist*, for example.

And unfortunately this only applies only to newspapers operating in one of the major global languages, such as English or Spanish. There isn't much of a global market for high quality journalism in Finnish or Swedish, for example.

The link between quality and success would need to be examined further, but in any case the picture is more complicated and perhaps more bleak than just the basic 'do good and you will do well'.

The second problem is with the content of the term 'quality journalism'. In order to be truly useful, a definition of quality journalism needs to be robust. And I would argue that to be robust, a definition of quality journalism would need to contain more attributes that are necessary, not just optional. This does not seem to be the case, at least according to the interviews.

I did 14 interviews with editors, journalists and publishers both in Finland and Britain and managed to identify only one such component: accuracy, which also was the most often mentioned attribute of quality journalism.

Even that is optional in one dimension, as a piece can be accurate and still not be quality journalism; in other words just getting the facts right is not enough. But it is optional in only one dimension, meaning that an article cannot be inaccurate and still qualify as quality journalism.

All other aspects of quality identified in this research are at least to some extent optional in two dimensions, meaning that the lack of the attribute does not mean a piece cannot be quality journalism, and also that the presence of the attribute does not mean that the piece is quality journalism.

For example, good writing was fairly often mentioned as a component of quality journalism. But when examined closely, it seems an article can be very well written and still be junk if for example, the information is inaccurate. But also a piece can be written in a very basic way or even sloppily and still be considered quality, if it contains significant new information, for example. So the term "quality journalism" seems to be highly elastic, maybe even to the point of not being very meaningful at all.

This work opens up at least two additional avenues for research if we want to explore the concept of journalistic quality further. The first would be to compare the views on quality gathered here and the actual reality presenting itself in the pages of the newspapers chosen for this project. Does the end-product show the ideals of quality journalism that its practitioners hold?

A second avenue of research is of course the audience. What do people buying and reading newspapers think is quality journalism? And to what extent do they even think quality is relevant when choosing which papers to buy?

Asking the readers might provide results that are very different from the ones obtained in this research by talking to the professionals. And in a way the views of the audience on quality are the ones that matter the most, because they are the ones buying the papers. Or rather not buying them, as too often nowadays seems to be the case.

Acknowledgements

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I am grateful for the interviewees both in Finland and Britain for giving generously of their time, usually far more generously than was initially agreed.

But what truly made this year special were the Fellows, new friends. I will remember you always.

Finally a big loving thank you for my wife Miia and kids Siiri and Aarni for taking part in this Oxford adventure.

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Appendix I, The Questionnaire

Mention a recent example of quality journalism from Your
Newspaper

What made it quality journalism?

Mention a recent example of quality journalism from some
other print media

What made it quality journalism?

What are the criteria for quality journalism at Your
Newspaper?

What is the most important one of these?

What if any are unique to your newspaper?

Have the criteria for quality journalism changed during the
time you have worked here?

In general is journalism in Finland/Britain of better
quality than 20 years ago?

What factors make quality worse/better?

Should one be concerned about the quality of journalism?

What are the threats to quality at the moment?

Have the criteria for quality in journalism changed?

SHOW AND TELL

Is this article quality journalism?

What about this one?

Are there any criteria of quality that would apply to both
articles?

THIS SECTION FOR PUBLISHERS

How important is quality for your newspaper?

What can management do to support high quality?

Does money guarantee quality in journalism?

How would you describe the relationship between quality and resources?

Is quality a useful concept in the management of a journalistic organizations, is it too vague?

When making decisions about resources how much thought is given to how the decision will affect quality?

How much is journalistic quality discussed in the management?

THIS SECTION FOR WRITERS

What was the last piece you did for the paper?

Was it quality journalism?

Why/why not?

What was the last piece where you felt you had achieved high quality

What were the factors making it so?

Have you ever been expressly told what are the quality criteria for your newspaper?

THIS SECTION FOR EDITORS

Is quality a useful concept in the management of a journalistic organizations, is it too vague?

Is there any written statement saying what is quality for your organization?

If not, why?

How does someone entering the organization learn what quality journalism means for the paper?

How much is quality discussed daily at the editorial office?

Should there be more talk about quality in journalism?

Appendix II, The interviewees (and length of interview)

Helsingin Sanomat

Mikael Pentikäinen, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher 40 minutes

Kalle Silfverberg, Staff Writer 35 minutes

Suomen Kuvailehti

Tapani Ruokanen, Editor-in-Chief 29 minutes

Tuomo Lappalainen, Staff Writer 23 minutes

Tarja Hurme, Publisher 42 minutes

Iltalehti

Katja Boxberg, Staff Writer 51 minutes

Kari Kivelä, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher 45 minutes

The Economist

Edward Lucas, Staff Writer 28 minutes

John Peet, Europe Editor 21 minutes

Susan Clarke, Publisher, EMEA 18 minutes

Financial Times

John Thornhill, Europe Editor 33 minutes

Ben Fenton, chief media correspondent 35 minutes

The Sun

Trevor Kavanagh, columnist 35 minutes

Fergus Shanahan, Executive Editor 30 minutes