DIACOMET

„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability"

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FINLAND

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1. Summary

This report focusing on Finland is one of the eight country-specific studies presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

Total of 87 focus group discussions were held across Austria, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Switzerland. Over 500 participants took part in these discussions, reflecting on the ethics of public communication and the media environment in their respective countries. The findings are presented in national reports, each prepared independently by the respective country team.

This report examines how non-institutional media actors in Finland navigate public communication ethics within the contemporary hybrid media environment. Eleven focus group discussions with 76 participants were conducted across diverse groups of actors: politicians, experts, activists, artivists, influencers, podcasters, journalism students, ethnic minorities, rural residents, older people, and the youth.

In the analysis the participants expressed highly critical views on media and public communication throughout the report. Hybrid media environment that encompasses journalism and social media platforms were described as emotionally exhausting and precarious environments for users, shaped by the logic of the attention economy. Commercial and algorithmic incentives were seen to prioritise emotion over deliberation, undermining socially shared discourse. This environment incentivises a "diversity paradox": while expanding representation and enabling public participation, it also fragments public attention and draws actors into separate communicative realities. While the criticism articulated in focus group discussions challenge Finland's self-image as a high-trust and open democracy, this signals participants' ethical awareness rather than political apathy.

Participants' values and situated ethical frameworks shed light on compelling insights for communication ethics research. These sometimes challenge and exceed professional codes like journalistic guidelines. Values such as *honesty*, *epistemic diversity and humility*, *care*, and *dialogue* emerged as responses to dilemmas that traditional norms—such as "objectivity"—struggle to resolve.

Theoretical Background

A shared research framework developed collaboratively between the WP3 lead (Tampere University and national research teams draws on research into the hybrid media

environment (Chadwick 2017) and the attention economy (Davenport and Beck 2001; Webster 2014; Klinger and Svensson 2016). These approaches highlight that the pursuit and commodification of attention have become key logic to contemporary public communication, shaping the dynamics of information dissemination and participation in digital spaces.

In today´s hybrid media environment, where public attention functions as a scarce and unequally distributed resource (Citton 2017), the competition for visibility has markedly intensified. While some actors can convert attention into new forms of discursive influence and symbolic power, others encounter increasing limitations in their opportunities to participate in public debate or policymaking. The distribution of attention is therefore an ethical issue in itself (Bombaerts *et al.* 2024), calling for critical reflection on how different groups and their perspectives are represented—or excluded—in public discourse.

Beyond redistributing power, the attention economy also impacts the quality of public discourse. Since visibility is often achieved through emotional intensity or disruption, actors may be incentivised to adopt extreme performative strategies. These dynamics are further reinforced by algorithmic environments, which systematically amplify content that evokes strong emotional reactions (Papacharissi 2021; Phillips 2018; Phillips and Milner 2021). This often includes aggressive or hostile rhetoric, trolling, harassment, and the spread of misinformation — all of which contribute to growing mistrust and cynicism in society (Persily and Tucker 2020; Rogers 2024). As a result, we can see that conditions for dialogic communication are eroding, weakening empathy and citizens' capacity for meaningful engagement.

While grounded in theory, the framework also has practical value for empirical research**.** The concept of attention capital (Franck 2011, 2019) enables the identification of analytical actor categories operating occupying different positions within the attention economy and possessing diverse resources, strategies, or means for public participation. Rather than studying the field of professional journalism and the media, the focus in this study is set on civil society actors residing on the periphery of journalism and professional communication (Eldridge 2018; Hanusch and Löhmann 2022). Four categories were conceived to help locating them:

2. **Attention Magnets** – Individuals or groups with high public visibility (e.g. influencers, celebrities, politicians)

3. **Attention Workers** – Content creators competing for epistemic authority without institutional status. (e.g. podcasters, citizen journalists, journalism students)

4. **Attention Hackers** – Actors strategically manipulaing visibility, often from the fringes. (e.g. activists, counter-media outlets)

5. **Attention-Deprived** – Marginalised groups struggling to attain public attention. (e.g. ethnic or cultural minorities, the youth, elderly people)

While seeking correspondence with analytical categories and real actors and social groups in each participating country, the research teams were encouraged to identify locally relevant cases that had yielded public debate on communication ethics. This opened two strategies for the recruitment of participants in the focus groups. In the "intra-category" approach, focus groups discussions were held with participants from one actor category (for instance, "attention workers"). In the case approach, participants representing two or more actor categories were brought together in a single session to discuss an issue of shared interest.

A Method

Focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. Discussions were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organisation established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund* (*Sitra*), with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive conversation by encouraging listening, reflection, and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents *emic* approach (Alasuutari 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

This shared methodological framework ensured overall coherence across country reports while allowing teams to adapt it to national contexts. In the chapter Q, each research team will explain their methodological strategies in more detail.

Research Questions and Structure of the Report

The analysis in WP3 is guided by a shared set of research questions designed to explore how non-professional or peripherical actors perceive communication ethics:

RQ1. How do participants describe and evaluate current hybrid media environment?

RQ2. How do they describe and assess the state of public communication in relation to the policies that matter to them?

RQ3. How do participants define and prioritise ethical principles in public communication and whom do they consider responsible for upholding or institutionalising these principles?

These questions reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions, and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns, and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package, and the DIACOMET project in general, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

In what follows all national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of the research setting: how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions and analysed the data produced in the discussions? The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first one explores participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication*, and the third examines their perspectives to *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises key ethical tensions and challenges identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

All quotations from the focus group discussions used in this report are pseudonymised. Pseudonymisation was carried out manually and deterministically to ensure confidentiality, with each pseudonym used consistently. A context-sensitive approach was adopted to preserve the cultural and social nuances of the data while maintaining narrative coherence. The excerpts from the focus group discussions are translated in English. The translations aim to convey what the participants meant, which means. that they include researchers' interpretations.

2. Introduction to the Country Report on FINLAND

Located in Northern Europe, Finland is a geographically extensive yet sparsely populated country with approximately 5.6 million residents (Statistics Finland 2025), predominantly concentrated in the southern regions. It recognises two official languages—Finnish and Swedish—and is home to the Indigenous Sámi people in the northern Lapland. While Finland remains culturally and linguistically homogeneous in many respects, its major cities are increasingly multicultural, with a growing proportion of residents speaking non-official languages (City of Helsinki 2023).

Finland presents a particularly revealing case for understanding how digital transformation challenges public communication ethics in high-trust societies. Finland´s analytical significance stems from three specific features—its exceptionally high institutional trust (OECD 2024), consensus-oriented political culture, and the cultural tradition of civic enlightenment (*sivistys*) —which have historically underpinned robust public discourse. These same strengths, however, become sources of tension as institutional trust encounters digital disruption, consensus culture confronts polarising platform dynamics, and enlightenment tradition conflicts with the attention economy.

Rather than simply documenting this shift, this report analyses how non-institutional media actors are responding to these challenges. The analysis aims to reveal emerging patterns of *situated ethical practices*—context-specific, adaptive ways of navigating public communication—that reflect broader transformations in democracy. As traditional institutional frameworks struggle to accommodate digital dynamics, actors aim to develop purposeful, yet fragmented, responses that both adapt to and resist platform-mediated pressures.

Three interconnected transformations canvass analysis. First, the acceleration and fragmentation of media environments that disrupt established patterns of public discourse while introducing new forms of communicative stress and strategic recalibration. Second, democratic participation that is reshaped by expansion of access in many platforms and heightened competition for public visibility. Third, changes in the participatory environment give incentives to new ethical orientations that help blend individual responsibility, emotional awareness, and selective resistance to commercial logics.

The report builds understanding iteratively in three main chapters. In chapter 5, we analyse how the participants perceived the changing media environment and its impact on public discourse. Chapter 6 examines how actors described their engagement with this environment and public communication through platform selection, visibility management, and strategic participation. In chapter 7, we explore *situated ethical practices* that emerge

from these adaptations, offering insights into how non-institutional actors sustain public engagement under contested conditions.

3. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

Between April and December 2024, eleven focus group discussions were conducted in Finland to explore how non-institutional media actors evaluate public communication (see Appendix 1 for details). Following the DIACOMET project's methodology, participants were recruited based on four analytical positions available in the attention economy: "Attention Magnets" (politicians, experts), "Attention Hackers" (activists, artivists), "Attention Workers" (influencers, podcasters, journalism students), and "Attention-Deprived" (ethnic minorities, rural residents, youth, older people). Each focus group comprised participants from the same actor category, enabling in-depth exploration of shared perspectives and intra-group dynamics.

In the recruitment, demographic diversity in gender, age, and educational background was pursued, though some biases emerged in the process. Women outnumbered men by 16 percentage points (55% vs. 39%), with non-binary participants constituting six per cent. Participants under 40 were underrepresented, and those with higher education were overrepresented. This was partly due to the deliberate inclusion of middle-aged, educated experts and politicians in the focus groups for Attention Magnets. In addition, due ethical restrictions that barred participation from the youth under 18, they were represented by youth workers from public institutions and NGOs. Regional diversity was effectively ensured through organising the focus group discussion online in Zoom, allowing participation from different geographic areas.

A notable share of participants was recruited through intermediary organisations such as NGOs, community groups, and advocacy networks. These actors not only helped identifying potential participants but also reflected a pattern in Finnish civic life, where public influence is often exercised via collective structures. As recruitment moved beyond institutional networks, even the opportunities to forge contact with would-be participants proved to be challenging, specifically in two categories. Attention Magnets — such as celebrities or TV personalities — were difficult to contact due to their privacy measures, often requiring interaction with intermediaries like PR agencies or social media outreach. Attention Hackers, in turn, were difficult to locate, as they tended to value anonymity for safety and political strategy (Maly 2019). As recruitment through traditional methods like phone or email proved ineffective, snowball sampling through personal networks was deployed.

Conversely, Attention-Deprived groups were more accessible and motivated, as they appreciated the opportunity to be included in the study to demand proper representation in public communication. With this category, challenges pertained to potential participants' reluctance to discuss polarised topics (e.g., transgender issues, sex work), leading to delays in scheduling or cancelling the discussions altogether.

Despite challenges, the implementation of focus groups yielded constructive discussions, even amid differing opinions, suggesting that structured, small-group dialogue can bridge divides and promote mutual understanding.

The thematic analysis of the transcript material was conducted using an inductive qualitative approach. The material was carefully read and pseudonymised — a process that demanded intensive familiarisation with the content and served as an initial phase of the analysis rather than merely a technical step. The analysis was conducted inductively. Three central themes were singled out for the thematic analysis: "media environment", "public communication", and "ethics and responsibilities"**.** The subthemes are identified in the following image (Image 1).

MEDIA ENVIRONMENT
- Journalism
- Institutional actors
- Non-institutional actors
- Social media & technology
- Media landscape & change

PUBLIC COMMUNICATION
- Democracy
- Political culture
- Market-driven communication
- Participation
- Personal strategies
- Attitudes and emotions

ETHICS & RESPONSIBILITIES
- Diagnoses of communication problems
- Endorsed values
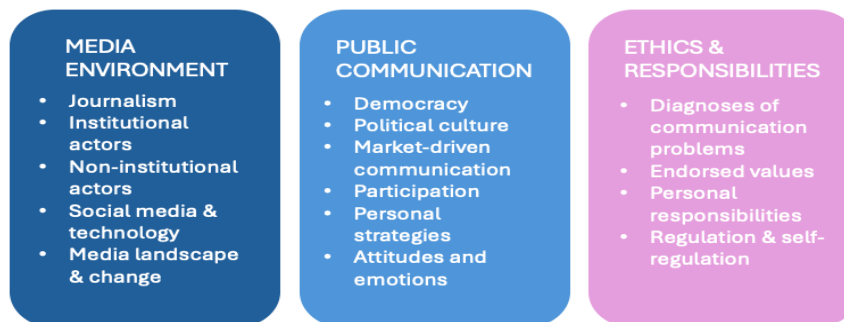- Personal responsibilities
- Regulation & self-regulation

Image 1. *Overview of the analytical coding framework.*

To preserve contextual richness and avoid abstracted empiricism (Mills 1957), sub-themes were deliberately kept limited. For instance, within the journalism sub-theme, discussions could have been readily divided into seemingly separate but in many ways interwoven topics such as "journalists"**, "**news values" or "audience relations". However, inductive reading allowed for closer attention to the relations, tensions, and contradictions inherent in

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participants´ expressions. The coding process was carried out through the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

Ethical Notes: Pseudonymisation and Language Model Use

In the Finnish study, participants were offered the opportunity to choose their pseudonymised research names; if they did not provide a preference, a name was assigned to them. Allowing participants to select their pseudonyms can foster empowerment, particularly for members of marginalised groups (Pretorius and Patel 2024). Accordingly, the first and last names accompanying the quotations in this report are pseudonyms.

We have used the Claude Opus 4 language model for language revision and proofreading. We are fully aware that we remain entirely responsible for the content of the report.

4. Experiencing the Media Environment

In this chapter, we examine how non-institutional media actors in Finland — politicians, experts, activists, artivists, influencers, podcasters, journalism students and marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and rural residents — perceive and navigate the contemporary media environment. As Deuze (2007) argues, "the whole of the world and our lived experience in it can be seen as framed by, mitigated through, and made immediate by pervasive and ubiquitous media." Understanding participants' experiences is thus essential for analysing the ethical dimensions of public communication, where media platforms shape dialogue, manage access, and influence participation.

Finland´s media environment rests on the long-established triad of the public broadcasting company Yleisradio (YLE), a handful of "almost national newspapers" published in the capital of Helsinki, and a blanket of regional and local newspapers that covers the whole country. Due to this media structure, Finland boasts reputation as a "newspaper-reading nation" with high levels of trust in news (Reunanen *et al.* 2024). However, digitalisation and concentration of media ownership are reshaping this landscape. Two leading conglomerates now dominate most of the print and online outlets, prompting concerns about shrinking pluralism and content recycling (Lehtisaari *et al.* 2024). In addition, the distribution costs of print newspapers have forced many local and regional papers to cut print days (Heikkilä *et al.* 2023).

As in other Western countries, Finnish audiences are now overwhelmingly online: 94 per cent of the population accesses the internet every day (Statistics Finland 2024), albeit generational cleavages are quite pronounced. Roughly three-quarters of citizens under thirty-five use digital platforms such as Instagram or TikTok, whereas no more than one in five maintains a paid digital-news subscription (Reunanen *et al.* 2024). Forty per cent of adults listen to podcasts weekly.

Structural transformations in the media landscape, coupled with broader societal shifts, have heightened tensions within the country's historically stable media culture. Due to political pressures towards the news media, YLE is currently facing severe cuts to its budget. Meanwhile, audiences are increasingly fragmenting across social media platforms. Numerous institutions and individuals have withdrawn from X (formerly Twitter), signalling an erosion of the shared media spaces.

Acceleration, polarisation and diversity

Participants' observations resonated with the contextual shifts outlined above, reflecting both structural transformations in the media landscape as well as volatilities in political culture. When asked to characterise the Finnish media environment, they repeatedly returned to four intersecting themes: relentless acceleration, emotional intensity, polarisation, and a mixed sense of pluralism and disconnection.
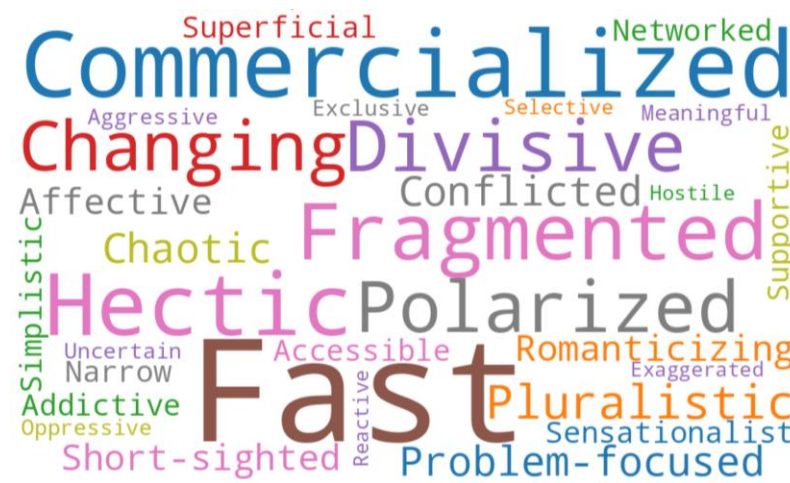

Image 2. *In a* warm-up assignment for the focus groups, the participants were asked to describe the media environment with three adjectives. Their responses are visualised in the word cloud.

Participants frequently labelled the environment as "hectic," "chaotic", and "uncontrollable," evoking a social-theoretical notion of acceleration (Rosa 2015). This observation points to a changing landscape wherein news cycles and digital contents demand constant vigilance from users. The perception of change in the media environment was often anchored to a specific historical trajectory, typically the 2010s, when digital platforms, algorithmic content delivery, and attention-driven logic had become apparent to all.[1]

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[1] As with all sociotechnical transformations, change is never linear, uniform or all-encompassing, but composed of multiple, competing and contradictory developments (e.g. Fagerjord and Storsul 2007). Some participants argued that the acceleration of digital media culture and the growing influence of

Fragmentation, driven by platformisation (Hermida and Mellado 2020), has prompted what participants described as cognitive overload, with journalism adapting to digital virality by breaking stories into rapid and compressed updates. As one influencer noted:

> *"Take almost any major news story from this week. Instead of doing one big article about it, they'll make eight smaller ones. [--] As a user, you are compelled to check the news ten times a day to piece things together."*
> *Marja Halla, female, influencer*

The pace of the news flow was perceived as shortsighted, aligning with concepts of digital amnesia (Hoskins 2018), where the rapid turnover of content erodes collective memory and fosters a *shrinking present* (Rosa 2015). Participants also tied acceleration to their own social media use, describing it as addictive, anxiety-triggering, and resulting in the fear of missing out (FOMO) when disconnected.

Emotional intensity emerged as the second defining feature, with participants recognising strategic deployment of affects in the media. Several discussants noted that this resonates with the audience´s real or projected desire for emotional engagement. A researcher in the experts' focus group captured this line of thought:

> *"Emotions are used strategically by the media. As consumers, we seem to seek that mindset out too [--] It is as if we wanted to be surrounded by those emotions and just soak into them." Riitta Kallio, female, researcher*

The third dynamic involves the interconnected phenomena of siloing and polarisation. Participants described living in distinct media realities shaped by algorithmic filtering and social self-selection. An artivist reflected on this separation:

> *"Sure, talking about 'bubbles' sounds tired. Still, looking at my social media feed, I can see how specific my bubbles are. It features the capital region, it's left-leaning, liberal, and middle-class. I cannot see what the next person is fed with. So, no wonder that I'm sometimes surprised of what is*

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algorithmic logics has shaped their experiences since the 2010s. In the meantime, others emphasised the enduring relevance of traditional media: television, radio, local newspapers, printed cultural magazines delivered entirely outside the digital environment.

happening in society. 'Wait, how come the election results turned out like that?'" Leo Sundgren, male, artivist

Whilst communicative separation was associated with the segmentation of media spaces, polarisation was recognised as a broader societal outcome of this development. In this context, polarisation does not primarily refer to conventional political parties, but rather reflects layers of cultural, geographical and socio-economic identities that intensify in-group loyalties fostering distrust towards out-groups (Mason 2018). Cleavages between urban and rural populations, men and women, younger and older generations, or religious and non-religious citizens are often activated by domestic politics, but they also transcend national borders. One participant noted that his values align more with rural residents in Germany than with fellow Finns based in the capital region. Digital affordances enable individuals to connect with like-minded communities globally, while diverse ideological currents—from populism to anti-racism—circulate through transnational networks (Valaskivi and Sumiala 2013). Even if the media had not originated polarisation, participants believed it amplifies the trend:

"The media environment definitely polarises us. Some go straight to reading an anti-immigration counter media or hang out on social media, while others lean more towards quality journalism. Once these patterns become routinised, they push us into extremes." Riitta Kallio, female, researcher

These structural dynamics create what participants experienced as a *diversity paradox*: unprecedented access to varied voices and perspectives is accompanied by reduced capacity for dialogue. The same technological infrastructure that enables representational pluralism fragments audiences, obliterating communication across the segments.

The Contested Role of Journalism: Gatekeeping Under Strain

Many participants in this study were themselves active content producers and engaged in public communication. From this vantage point, they evaluated journalism in two intertwined ways: *normatively*, as an emblem of democratic ideals, and *practically* as a gatekeeping structure capable of amplifying or constraining their voices. Table 1 summarises how actor categories positioned themselves vis-à-vis journalism and the key criticisms they outlined.

Table 1. The actor categories' relationship to journalism.

Actor Category	Relationship	Main Criticism
Attention Magnets Politicians, experts	Symbiotic, yet shifting. Interact with journalists to gain visibility while bypassing them via direct channels when needed.	Journalism excessively relies on a limited set of sources. It is timid to complex or controversial views and lacks global perspective. While losing agenda-setting power, journalism becomes more opinionated, especially among younger journalists.
Attention Hackers Activists, artivists	Tactical, instrumental. Seek visibility through disruptive tactics to raise awareness of the ignored causes.	Journalism is profit-driven and compliant with the status quo, while being easily drawn to spectacles.
Attention Workers Influencers, podcasters, journalism students	Competitive, accessory. Seek to develop alternative approaches to media production. Emphasise depth over speed. Engage in reverse boundary work.	Journalism is shallow, click-driven, reactive, and obsessed with speed. Newsrooms lack resources for quality and ethical journalism.
Attention-Deprived Ethnic minorities, rural inhabitants, young and older people	Objectified. Frequently covered in the news through negative or stereotypical frames. Cautiously optimistic about reforms.	Journalism is biased for urban, liberal, white and middle-class views. Prone to stereotypical representations.[2]

Eroding gatekeeping

Participants widely perceived that journalism´s traditional agenda-setting power has diminished. Traditional gatekeeping no longer holds exclusive authority in shaping public communication, as digital platforms and social media enable actors to bypass editorial filters and address audiences and followers directly.

This development was seen most clearly among politicians who can customarily expect consistent news coverage for their activities. They viewed the loosening grip of journalism in public communication positively, as platforms such as X enable politicians to build followings,

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[2] While Attention-deprived category highlights those who feel marginalised in the news media, such categorisation inevitably risks of being precisely the kind of reduction participants criticise journalism. These analytical categories were devised to identify power dynamics in the attention economy. We do suggest that all members in the category are uniformly marginalised.

influence narratives, and rendering them more resilient to negative news coverage. They attributed this resilience to the fleeting nature of the attention economy: several discussants noted that critical media coverage rarely had lasting consequences, as public attention quickly shifts elsewhere. Scandals, in their view, had become easier to cope with – sometimes even beneficial for their objects – due to the short lifespan of media outrage and fragmented online audiences. These accounts resonate with the notion of *the post-scandal era*, which posits that journalism's capacity to undermine politicians has weakened—and that scandals may counter-intuitively reinforce politicians' online support base and popularity (von Sikorski and Kubin 2021).

> *"Every politician is freaking out if their name is in the headlines. But give it a week—nobody will remember.' I always tell people, 'Relax!' I can only think of one politician who never bounced back after a scandal [a former prime minister]. That was a weird case. Everyone else pops back up, with voters cheering." Krista Silta, female, politician*

Actors with less institutional influence – such as podcasters, influencers, and activists **–** expressed a similar shift. Many noted that sparking discussion or outrage on social media had helped them to push issues into the news agenda, sometimes even forcing institutional or industrial reactions.

Profit-driven news practices

Near-universal critique across all the actor categories concerned journalism´s increasing commercialisation. Participants felt that economic pressures have reshaped journalistic priorities where a news story´s selling potential outweighs its informational value.

This criticism targeted what participants regarded as cheap clickbait. While tabloidisation of news has been criticised for a long time, the argument here is that the trend has reached the most respected outlets. This was perceived to undermine journalism's legitimacy across the board:

> *"Sometimes I am just shocked by the headlines. Like, is this Helsingin Sanomat [the biggest daily newspaper] I'm reading? — It is all gone tabloid." Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Secondly, participants argued that commercial pressures have led to the concentration of media ownership and content recycling. They described how complex or uncertain topics, especially those lacking a clear visual or emotional hook, often struggle to gain traction in the news. Both researchers and activists voiced concerns that this logic excludes exposure to long-term and structural topics in favour of the immediately attention-grabbing.

Furthermore, participants felt that relentless publishing pace and profit incentives drive journalism to play it safe with sourcing, with the same trusted public actors, known for being media savvy, appearing repeatedly in the news. Consequently, a small number of news outlets and a relatively narrow pool of voices – whether politicians or experts – come to dominate the news media.

Some participants argued that the pursuit of profit may erode the autonomy of journalism. As one discussant put it, "you sing the songs of whoever feeds you" – a pithy illustration to underscore journalism´s dependency on its funders. This dynamic, they argued, readily engenders double standards, criticised particularly by Attention Workers, who say they are proud of challenging journalism´s moral legitimacy while not seeking entry into its institutional core. Here we may see two forms of boundary work in action. While media professionals try to draw a line between themselves and *interlopers* (Eldridge 2019) emphasising their robust commitment to ethical codes, many Attention Workers argued the opposite. In their view, those who operate in the margins of journalism often have higher ethical standards than those working in mainstream news organisations.

> *"The media lives off scandals and makes money from them. The loudest, most malicious voices get most visibility."*
> *Noora Kivistö, female, activist*

In addition to clickbait and sensational headlines, participants expressed concern over what they saw as the trivialisation of the news agenda. Examples included excessive coverage of a former ice hockey player's murder and Coldplay's visit to Helsinki during the band's world tour. The sheer volume of these topics was seen as excessive, so many participants chose, on principle, to skip them altogether.

From a participatory standpoint, this spectacle logic was perceived as distorting public engagement. Political activists expressed frustration that only disruptive or performative

actions, such as clashes with the police and dramaticised stunts, attract journalistic coverage (Boyle *et al.* 2012; De Cillia and McCurdy 2020). A climate activist highlighted this dynamic:

> *"Journalists have flat-out told us that a normal protest is not newsworthy. [--] That's a real problem, because activists don't want to resort to radical civil disobedience. You'd hope that ordinary civic action would be covered, but it is not. So, we're pushed to conceive bigger and flashier stunts to provide something special and spectacular." Laura Hietala, female, climate activist*

Partisanship and bias

Many participants argued that Finnish journalism no longer lives up to its self-image of impartiality and comprehensive truth-telling, while identifying tendencies towards partisanship and systemic biases. As previous audience research suggests, news is rarely perceived as mere information transmission; instead, it is assumed that news always convey ideological assumptions that become visible only through varying audience interpretations (Heikkilä *et al*. 2012). These findings were echoed in the focus group discussions. They noted that advocacy-oriented and opinionated reporting is present in legacy media, too, often shaped by journalists' values and worldviews rather than institutional allegiance to political parties.

In this usage, partisanship is an inherently ambiguous notion that reflects evaluators´ positionality. As a token of this some researchers in the experts' focus group and political activists characterised Finnish journalism as increasingly right-wing and market-liberal, while many politicians and rural residents perceived it favouring left-wing and environmentalist values. Consequently, legacy media were labelled as both right- and left-leaning.

Building on these varied accounts of partisanship, participants brought their stakes and values to bear when evaluating the news coverage. Consistent with extensive research, the more personally significant a reported issue was, the more likely individuals were to judge journalism as partisan. This tendency is instrumental for the *hostile-media effect,* wherein people deeply invested in an issue tend to view even moderate reporting as biased against their side (Vallone *et al.* 1985). While the hostile-media-effect provides a valuable framework for understanding participants' subjectivity, it does not mean that all criticism of political bias

could be deflected. Nor can it be ruled out that journalism can be sometimes simply of poor quality.

Generational tensions in journalism criticism surfaced repeatedly. Politicians and rural residents portrayed young journalists as "agenda-driven". This impression echoes findings of the Worlds of Journalism study (Väliverronen *et. al.* 2023), which testified that younger Finnish journalists increasingly view their role as driving social change rather than neutral and detached observation. This evidence does not pertain to young journalist alone, as news journalism in the 2000s has become more interpretative and explanatory (Väliverronen 2022).

Beyond intentional partisanship, participants identified a broader array of systemic biases. These ranged from a narrow national lens to routine stereotyping. The participants highlighted "Finland-centrism" in the news: Scholars and political activists argued that genuinely global issues, such as immigration or climate policy, are routinely framed through a narrow national perspective. Correspondingly, more generic foreign news coverage was also perceived as skewed, focusing disproportionately on the most powerful states in world politics (e.g., the U.S. and Trump), while marginalising entire continents, not only Africa and Asia, but also Europe and the EU.

Alongside methodological nationalism (Beck 2006), participants perceived Finnish journalism as exhibiting domestic biases, possibly rooted in the relative homogeneity of newsrooms. With majority of Finnish journalists being white, female, liberal, urban, and middle-class, much of the coverage is written for an imagined audience that mirrors these same characteristics.

Members of the Attention-Deprived groups argued that such homogeneity translates into pervasive stereotyping: Young people are cast as either prodigies or delinquents; older people as super-seniors or fiscal burdens; rural life as either idyllic or environmental threat, and immigrants as socials problems or "successfully assimilated". One community worker characterised the pattern as tokenism:

> *"It´s sad how visibility works. Too often, a public figure from an immigrant background must distance themselves or oppose their roots for being heard. An individual woman may get media space if she removes her*

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headscarf, identifies as LGBTQ+, or speaks out against her own culture."
Layla Al-Farisi, female, immigrant community worker

Journalism´s enduring role in public communication

The preceding sections reveal that participants expressed highly critical views of Finnish journalism. The critical tone may reflect the research setting, which likely encouraged participants to demonstrate media literacy, particularly in terms of ethical considerations. However, their assessments were not merely abstract critiques but rooted in real-life examples and lived experiences. Disappointment in journalism tended to stem from a range of grievances. Among Attention-Deprived groups, most notably ethnic minorities, this criticism reflected profound systemic distrust, challenging Finland's consistently high trust ratings (Reunanen *et.al*, 2024). These qualitative findings nuance survey-based trust metrics by illustrating that trust is not a static or binary attribute, but a dynamic, contested stance shaped by context, identity, and personal history.

Despite these critiques, participants ascribed continued institutional significance to journalism. In Nick Couldry's (2003) terms, journalism still provides access to "the mythical centre of society" — a symbolic locus where visibility is conferred, issues are validated, and public relevance is established. This sentiment was potent among Attention-Deprived participants, who still showed faith in journalism's role as a public attention equaliser but stipulated that news organisations should pursue harder for greater diversity and fairness. Even those who primarily relied on alternative sources—such as international outlets or professional publications—and felt capable of bypassing journalistic gatekeeping, regarded journalism's coverage as societally vital. News journalism remains a crucial, though not exclusive, arena for contesting truths and shaping public discourse.

Precarious Participation in Social Media

For many participants, social media served as primary sites for information-seeking, socialising, and civic participation. Across all actor categories, platforms were necessary utilities but they should be used with caution. Participants valued platforms' potential for activism, networking, and public visibility, yet they were acutely aware of the parallel risks of exclusion, bias, and harassment. Regardless of their respective stances, social media called for strategic navigation from all.

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Table 2. The actor categories' relationship to social media and digital platforms.

Actor Category	Relationship	Main Criticism
Attention Magnets (Politicians, experts)	Amplified, selective. Blend prolific content creation with targeted engagement to shape public discourse.	Social media host and solicit hate speech and personal attacks and distorts engagement.
Attention Hackers (Activists & artivists)	Viral, elusive. Mobilising networks through performative tactics and satirical memes to amplify political causes.	Platform fragility threatens labour rights, risking privacy and visibility through volatile algorithms.
Attention Workers (Influencers, podcasters, journalism students)	Competitive. Potential source of influence and livelihood.	Fierce competition over popularity incites volatility of reputation and income.
Attention-Deprived (Ethnic minorities, rural inhabitants, young & older people)	Cautious. Blend routine engagement with guarded pursuit of solidarity, navigating risks with restricted expression.	Harassment and bias drive self-censorship and withdrawal, rendering platforms unsafe for participation.

Algorithmic governance and platform precarity

The criticisms outlined in Table 2 depict social media as an inherently unstable infrastructure: It is designed for connection but susceptible to exploitation. Attention Hackers and Attention Workers, such as artivists, influencers and podcasters, notably voiced this structural critique, interpreting their engagement through the lens of digital labour (Scholz 2012). Whether aspirational workers investing unpaid effort in pursuit of future livelihood (Duffy 2017) or established content producers, they emphasised the fragility of platforms. Participants emphasised how the unclear moderation practices, such as platform bans, shifting terms of service or shadow banning, may destroy years of creative work overnight.

> *"These platforms are a gamble– what works today might tank tomorrow. [--] Sure, these meme accounts and niche corners give us freedom, but I'm worried that one day all that might just collapse. They only work as long as people keep doing it for free – once they stop, all the good stuff vanishes. The structure is incredibly fragile." Jukka Kallio, male, artivist*

Participants' concerns resonate with platform studies' findings that *algorithmic governance* shapes visibility through hidden systems of recommendation and moderation (Bucher 2018). Attention Workers, navigating fiercely competitive digital spaces, described their success as precarious, dependent on algorithms that can catapult content one day and suppress it on the next.

> *"Whatever agora was being built in the early days of social media, nowadays it looks like a post-apocalyptic wasteland."*
> *Jukka Kallio, male, artivist*

Moreover, participants identified two intertwined challenges in algorithmic governance. First, they said that due to speed, brevity, and emotional pull, it is difficult to communicate complex ideas and nearly impossible to correct misinformation once it has spread. As one influencer observed with frustration:

> *"I've chosen a platform where I've thirty seconds to explain complex ideas. I try to do it responsibly, making sure there is no chance of being misunderstood. When something fails] it takes days to trying to clean up the mess." Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Second, the exact sorting mechanisms *contracted horizons:* by curating ever-narrower slices of content, algorithms encourage users to spiral into "rabbit holes," reinforcing voicing partial viewpoints. Rather than externalising this problem, participants admitted that the same had happened to them, too. This account underscores the structural vulnerability of users in the social media environment, which demands self-discipline and critical reflection.

> *"I started trying TikTok out, but it soon pulled me into a wormhole. So, I had to delete the app altogether. The algorithms feed you one topic, and suddenly that is your whole world. You have to be critical not to get stuck in it." Ingrid Nysten, female, influencer*

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Toxicity and shaming

Social media's architecture not only predisposes users to misinformation and misunderstandings but also amplifies hostile and provocative expressions (Yin and Zubiaga 2021). Participants across all actor categories reported pervasive toxicity in social media, including doxxing, harassment, and abusive comments. What was once fringe trolling seemed to have become a dominant mode of online discourse (Hannan 2018). While politicians admitted to engaging in confrontational exchanges themselves, the political rhetoric on X shocked a participant in the experts' group, highlighting divergent perceptions of online hostility:

> "I only joined X a couple of years ago to document what politicians say about the Sámi people. It was unbelievable. For example, a former MP openly called the Sámi Parliament an apartheid system and Northern Sámi people' colonialists.' I never would have believed it—seeing elected officials troll by their real names." Sari Lahtinen, female, researcher

While studies consistently show that women and marginalised groups are disproportionately targeted (Saresma *et al.* 2020), it is also revealed that all ideological camps and political parties are involved in these activities. For example, in Finland, both progressive and conservative politicians face attacks (Knuutila *et al.*, 2019). In the meantime, the impact of hostilities varies, as recipients interpret and withstand toxic content differently (Costello *et al.*, 2019). The studies highlight that digital hostility connects to power relations and identities in many contexts. In our research, Attention Magnets, such as politicians, said they were able to manage online hate speech by shielding privacy while continuing public engagement, whilst Attention-Deprived groups—youth, rural residents, and ethnic minorities— often reported self-censoring or withdrawal from public communication to avoid confrontation:

> "There was this chatter about pig farming. As a result of this, none of the farmers dares to post anything from inside their barns anymore. The moment you do it, animal-rights groups would come in swarms at you. You would get horrible messages that most folks could not handle. The backlash can be brutal." Ella Jokela, female, farmer

For young participants, social media felt distinctly unsafe, leaving adolescents feeling more exposed than protected. Beyond direct harassment, they frequently encountered peer

hostility and age-inappropriate violent contents. National data reinforce these accounts: two-thirds of the 16-24-year-olds in Finland report encountering hate speech online, with 16 per cent facing direct harassment (Statistics Finland 2021). Notably, social media's reach now extends to offline, adding new layers of exposure and risks. Youth workers noted that many adolescents have started to avoid even the most innocent activities, such as school events or and giving school presentations, for fear of viral shaming. This dynamic reflects Trottier's (2013; 2018) notion of *participatory surveillance*, whereby peer-to-peer monitoring fuels digital vigilantism and shaming.

"At some discos, the organisers tend to ban mobile phones or collect them at the door. Kids still come to these events, but they barely dance because they are so terrified of being recorded by someone and that the clip would then go viral." Minna Korhonen, female, youth worker

Platform-dependent content creators also described acute vulnerability, albeit from a different position in the attention capital hierarchy. Attention Workers' precariousness stemmed not from the lack of visibility but from total dependence on it. Since their work and identities are built on constant public exposure, any reputational blow would result in professional and personal collapse. Unlike institutional actors, content creators typically lack organisational buffers, legal aid, or crisis communication resources. One influencer voiced anxiety about how dormant online traces can be resurrected and turned against them:

"Social media has shown how easy it is to put someone on spike. That terrifies me! Consider this influencer who faced controversies due to the revelation of her allegedly racist writings in the past. Her old blog posts were weaponised to tear down everything she has done, including her human-rights work. It is a perfect snapshot of social media; anyone can be destroyed overnight." Ella Karjalainen, x, influencer

This culture of public shaming, where a single misstep can trigger widespread humiliation, has instilled a pervasive caution. Participants were keenly aware of a digital panopticon in which all contents are archived and possibly weaponised later. This awareness has a chilling effect that prevents open debate and discourages dissent, prompting increasingly elaborate privacy-management strategies.

Engagement and Empowerment

Despite structural vulnerabilities and hostile dynamics of digital platforms, participants across actor categories acknowledged that online environments facilitate interaction with followers and enhance public visibility. This can be instrumental for public engagement, which ranges from everyday interactions to strategic agency. While some participants limited their social media use due to fatigue or perceived risks, most regarded platforms as integral to their media practices.

Politicians and experts said they utilised social media strategically to refine communication and amplify public influence. Politicians monitored voter sentiments, challenged rivals, and provided cues for ensuing news coverage. Regular content production has positioned many of them as full-time media actors (Ekman and Widholm 2015), with a considerable portion of their daily workload allocated to media activities. Researchers, conversely, engage with platforms to fulfil universities' mandates for popularising science, cultivating their brands, and evaluating audience reception of scientific communication.

Activists' and artivists' capacity to influence political agendas, news media and public discourse relied heavily on decentralised digital networks and the collective power they aimed at mobilising. Through digital platforms, Attention Hackers orchestrated performative viral campaigns while recruiting like-minded individuals and provocatively challenging opposing perspectives. Conversely, Attention Workers, such as influencers and podcasters, depended on continuous interaction to cultivate engaged audience communities. Influencers described investing in emotional labour to curate platform safety and tone. In doing so, they were taking the role of second-order gatekeepers to restore the damages caused by algorithmic controls.

For Attention-Deprived groups, particularly the youth, digital platforms were seamlessly embedded in their daily interactions. Platforms not only facilitated identity construction but also served as the primary channel for peer-mediated information and news dissemination across WhatsApp, Snapchat, and TikTok. Thus, in the youth group, participants highlighted the vast emancipatory potential of platforms:

> *"Social media—and media more broadly—have significantly increased the visibility of LGBTQ+ people. Unlike ten or twenty years ago, you can now find public role models, connect with your community, and see stories you*

can relate to. There can be multiple queer people visible in the media at the same time, not just one or two. That has had a strong and positive impact on our young people." Virve Alava, X, youth worker

Participants consistently conveyed a profound sense of empowerment and immersion, mirroring the dynamic engagement highlighted at the outset of this analysis. Digital platforms served as vital spaces for self-expression and creativity, enabling actors to contribute novel perspectives to public discourse, albeit submitting themselves to intense competition in the attention economy. Many content producers, such as influencers, emphasised that their initial motivation stemmed from sharing personal experience and know-how to empower others, a goal they thought they were pursuing successfully:

"I do this for those young people who are neurodivergent, autistic or suffering mental health issues so that they will not be bullied. Just this morning, a child messaged me on Instagram asking how she could accept her neurological condition. I try to bring hope to these people in their life-and-death situations. That is why I do this." Johanna Vartio, female, influencer

The Media Environment as a Condition

In this chapter, we have examined Finnish non-institutional media actors' experiences and evaluations of the contemporary media environment. Participants' perspectives are not unique to Finland but rather consistent with global developments documented in communication scholarship. These accounts emphasise the accelerated tempo of news cycles and fragmented structure-driven communication, which, taken together, engender cognitive strain and disrupt cohesive narratives. Polarisation – fuelled by algorithmic curation and sociocultural divides – splinters discourse into disparate communicative realities. These patterns underscore a defining tension: while the digital media environment fosters greater pluralism, it simultaneously isolates individuals from each other, eroding shared comprehension.

A central dynamic emerged between empowerment and precarity. While digital systems enable politicians to build audiences, activists to orchestrate campaigns, and influencers to foster communities, simultaneously, they expose actors to substantial risks. Hostile interactions and the threat of public shaming prompt self-censorship, particularly among the

Attention-Deprived groups, while Attention Magnets and Attention Hackers need to navigate mounting concerns over privacy and reputational vulnerability. This pervasive precariousness – varying in intensity – coexists with strategic agency, as even the most marginalised actors assert influence through identity work, peer engagement, or crisis communication.

Participants expressed ethically charged criticism of journalism, questioning its entanglement with commercial spectacles, and perceived partisanship and biases that marginalise non-dominant voices. While critiques of commercialism are well-documented in audience research, the intensity of bias-related criticism in this study was particularly striking. The specific critiques partly reflect the composition of the participant sample: Attention-Deprived actors—such as ethnic minorities and rural residents—emphasised exclusion and stereotyping, while Attention Workers— podcasters and influencers—often projected their content production practices onto journalism, framing their work as a corrective to perceived failures in the mainstream news.

The critical tone is also shaped by the broader societal climate, where increasing affective polarisation has sharpened normative expectations of journalism and intensified public disillusionment. However, such criticism should not be understood merely as actor-specific projection or contextual backlash, as recent scholarship has documented shifts within journalism itself, including a growing emphasis on interpretive and advocacy-oriented formats and a generational change in professional ethos (Väliverronen *et al.* 2023).

By contrast, participants found it considerably more difficult to evaluate social media platforms. Compared to their detailed scrutiny of journalism, discussions about the operational logic of social media were more fragmented. For instance, only a few participants mentioned artificial intelligence, even though it has become central in debates over future challenges to authenticity or truth. This asymmetry highlights the opaque and abstract nature of platform governance, which impedes critical reflection, especially when compared to the more visible and institutionally bounded practices of journalism.

In sum, participants' discourse described the media environment not simply as a backdrop to communication, but as a constitutive condition that shapes engagement in both public and private spheres. In today's ubiquitous media landscape, media is not only accessed via devices but functions as an ever-present potential across all interactions, even those not overtly mediated. The awareness of participatory surveillance and the risk of sudden

exposure fosters a form of media-aware subjectivity that conditions communication and self-presentation, even offline. These structural conditions provide the foundation for the next chapter, which examines how actors navigate the political, cultural, and democratic dimensions of public communication in the public sphere.

5. Engaging with Public Communication

Global issues have strongly shaped public discourse in recent years: Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, Finland's rapid NATO membership in 2023 ensuing strong emphasis on defence policies, and the political situation in the United States following President Trump's 2024 re-election have emerged as pivotal topics. In addition, domestic economic policies foregrounding high debt levels (77% of the GDP), the government's austerity policies and labour market reforms, have triggered widespread dissent culminating in multiple political strikes and public protests in 2024.

Diverse sociocultural issues have further deepened confrontation within Finland's vibrant civic culture: debates over racism, provoked by controversies surrounding the Finns Party member's social media statements, alongside with tightened asylum policies, have fuelled tensions between national-conservatives and green-left identity perspectives. Increasing youth mental health issues, youth crime, and gang violence, which are often associated with immigrant-background communities, have deepened division over care and integration versus law and order. Student and youth activism on climate change and the war in Gaza, which gained momentum in 2024, polarised generational and ideological perspectives. Meanwhile, universities and researchers have been dragged into polarised value conflicts, where academic cosmopolitanism is increasingly questioned by nationalistic populism.

In this chapter, the focus group discussions on public communication in Finland are analysed in four subchapters: Democracy, assessing actors' perceptions of systemic legitimacy (6.1), Political communication in a polarised era (6.2), Commercialism's pervasive influence (6.3), and Participation and navigation (6.4).

Democratic Legitimacy and the Public Sphere

Public communication hinges on the legitimacy of a democratic system. Participants' reflections on democracy and its perceived strengths or erosion, therefore, offer an entry point for analysing how different actors perceive their roles and resources within the public communication environment. The reflections uncover assumptions about legitimacy: who drives discourses, how institutions respond, and who feels empowered or excluded?

While this report does not engage with a vast array of democratic theories, it draws on contrasting perspectives of deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism to frame

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participants' perceptions of trust and legitimacy in Finnish institutions. Jürgen Habermas's (1962) concept of the public sphere, which envisions deliberative, rational-critical discourse as the foundation of democratic legitimacy, contrasts with Chantal Mouffe's (2000) view of democracy as inherently conflictual, where legitimacy would emerge through contestation. These perspectives help understanding how non-institutional media actors navigate a polarised media environment, where trust in institutions shapes their communicative strategies.

Participants' views on democratic legitimacy can be mapped along a spectrum of reform, adaptation, and restoration, revealing democracy as a lived condition shaped by everyday expressions. (see Table 3 below).

Table 3. The actor categories' relationship to democratic legitimacy and the public sphere.

	Reform	**Adaptation**	**Restoration**
Actor categories	Climate activists, Artivists, Ethnic minorities	Politicians, Podcasters, Influencers, Journalism students	Researchers, rural Residents, Older people, Youth, Researchers
Democratic Critique	Exclusionary system ignoring climate, cultural and racial justice. Aims at systemic overhaul	Imperfect yet functional system calls for pluralism and constant challenging	Exclusionary system lacks trusted structures to restore social integration and national unity
Sources for nostalgia	Historical examples of collective and/or radical action,	Given that history is irreversible it can only inspire life in new contexts	Nordic welfare state with autonomous institutions and organised way of life

Reform: distrust and exclusion

Climate activists, artivists, and ethnic minorities advocated for systemic change in the Finnish democracy, which they perceived as unresponsive and exclusionary, reproducing systemic barriers to environmental, cultural, and racial justice. Their criticism blended Habermasian aspirations for rational discourse with Mouffe's agonism, revealing a multifaceted legitimacy crisis where institutions arguably fail to represent diverse voices equitably.

Climate activists, envisioning a post-capitalist economy (Mason 2015), articulated the most radical critique, viewing the Finnish democracy as a façade that perpetuates superficial participation while ignoring substantive political demands. Embracing a moral imperative

that prioritises ethical conduct over legal norms, they expressed deep distrust in a system they saw as complicit in environmental degradation. As one activist articulated:

> *"We uphold many myths in Finland — that our education system is the best in the world, that we're a nature-loving nation, that our mining industry is sustainable. It's all just a sham. In legislative processes, they collect statements from all sides, but for decision-making, that means nothing. The whole process is a scripted performance. This applies to emission laws and the preservation of old-growth forests, researchers and citizens are constantly ignored." Aada Mänty, female, activist*

Artivists drawing from leftist, feminist, and anti-consumerist worldviews criticised the system for eroding cultural diversity and artistic freedom at the expense of commercial interests and due to pressures from austerity policies. Their nostalgic references to pre-digital media and trade unionism reflected a yearning for a time when marginal voices had a right to thrive, contrasting it with the current era of "cultural hostility". Their critique focused on reclaiming cultural spaces, including the mainstream media, for elevating artistic freedom and reinstating unsung or marginalised narratives.

Ethnic minorities, in turn, expressed systemic distrust rooted in lived experiences of racism and alienation. Their critiques pointed not merely to stereotyping in the media but also to political decision-makers and authorities perceived as culturally insensitive or unresponsive. This reflected a broader experience of exclusion, where public institutions were seen to misunderstand or mismanage the realities of minority communities:

> *"If minorities are constantly attacked so harshly about, it will drain us dry. When this happens, we would close off and stay defensive. This is a toxic situation we´re in right now. People with ethnic backgrounds are scared of seeking help, because if they do, they would risk their kids being placed in care due to misunderstandings or errors by professionals." Omar Issa, male, migrant youth worker*

Compared to climate activists, who engage with the system while challenging its legitimacy, many minority participants distanced themselves from formal institutional channels, placing hope in the future generations to become better integrated, yet loyal to their heritage, to drive societal change.

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Adaptation: Pragmatic Engagement

In contrast to calls for systemic change, politicians, podcasters, influencers, and students largely adopted an adaptive stance, viewing Finnish democracy as imperfect but functional —a framework that enables influence through pragmatic engagement. Their reflections highlighted a commitment to working within existing structures, emphasising the role of compromise and dialogue in sustaining democracy.

> *"Social media has absolutely strengthened democracy."*
> *Jukka Virtanen, male, politician*

Politicians unanimously praised digital media for broadening participation, interpreting unfiltered interaction with citizens as a democratic strength. While this stance might appear driven by strategic self-interest, it also reflected somewhat sincere self-perception as stewards of democracy, blending representative and participatory democratic ideals.

Some politicians endorsed a Mouffian perspective, asserting conflict as a democratic condition, while others expressed Habermasian concerns about eroding consensus, wary of the effects of divisive dynamics on democracy:

> *"Democracy requires compromises. No single party in our parliament has absolute power. A good compromise reflects the majority´s will while including the minority´s perspective, too. Now, this idea is not as strong as it should be. We might be heading slightly in the wrong direction."*
> *Erik Sundström, male, politician*

Podcasters, influencers, and students viewed the public sphere as a space of opportunity and uncertainty, requiring adaptation. Even though they criticised commercialism in the media, their approach was neither wholly reformist nor nostalgic. Instead, they saw democracy realised in pluralism, which they saw themselves advancing through digital platforms and their future work. Podcasters spoke about the need to tolerate uncertainty and conflicting truths:

> *"We're facing the question of what to do when there's no obvious unified culture. How do we form perceptions of reality, of what's true? This era*

*demands that we learn to tolerate… Uncertainty about the truth is greater
than before. We also need to accept that we can hold multiple conflicting
views at once." Tommy Kallio, male, podcaster*

Restoration: Yearning for cohesion

Rural residents, experts, older people, and the youth articulated a restorative stance, expressing nostalgia for earlier forms of democratic legitimacy. These groups perceived that the current public sphere departed from a more cohesive and trusted era of Finnish democracy. Their longing for a consensus-oriented public sphere aligned with the tradition of the welfare state, which peaked at the latter half of the 20th century.

Rural residents lamented that urban-centric media narratives marginalise agricultural livelihoods. They said they recalled an era when agriculture was central to Finland's national identity, and journalism was attentive to rural concerns. Now Finnish cities are inhabited by second- or third-generation rural migrants, whose loose ties to the countryside are sustained by romanticised media narratives about rural life. This view differs from that of rural residents, who stress that the current livelihoods and lifestyles in the countryside are much more diverse.

After exiting the workforce, the older participants felt increasingly sidelined in a society that prioritises youth and economic productivity. Rather than blaming journalism or public communication for this problem, they pointed to the system's failure to provide equal care and treatment to all, in the post-welfare state era and adapting to the reality where life expectancy has risen significantly leaving the active retirees´ potential unused.

The focus group, comprising youth workers and NGOs, aligned with the Restorative line of thought, emphasising that society is unable to keep young people safe. While they acknowledged digital tools empowering young people to influence society, they longed for the pre-digital era in which children were able to explore identity and belonging without the burden of peer surveillance or online shaming. Their reflections also revealed a deeper legitimacy challenge: young voices are often excluded from decision-making processes, as the youth are perceived to lack credibility due to their young age.

Researchers, though institutionally privileged, expressed concerns over the erosion of shared epistemic frameworks and relativisation of democratic norms. While sharing climate

activists' worries about unsustainable economic growth, researchers adopted a less radical stance by focusing on the loss of deliberative and cohesive public discourse. They said they recalled an era when epistemic authorities like universities and trusted journalism facilitated reasoned public debate, contrasting with today´s fragmented, affect-driven media space.

> *"I´ve tried to speak critically about societal issues since the early days of my career, but I've never felt as hopeless as I do now. Ignorance is overriding the truth, and I have no tools to counter this trend. The problem is fundamental. I mean, what does my research matter when even the governments can speak against the facts? It´s not just attacks on researchers and experts, but on knowledge and truth in general."*
> *Sari Lahtinen, female, researcher*

The alignment of actor categories in Table 3 reveals complex power dynamics that challenge the assumption that attention capital equals systemic influence or satisfaction. Despite their institutional authority in policy networks and journalism, researchers saw that their epistemic authority in affect-driven media spaces is declining. Similarly, Attention Hackers, face institutional inertia that limits their networked power. Correspondingly, Attention-Deprived groups reinforced their reformist or restorative stances even if they tend to experience intensified exclusion from public communication.

Attention Workers and politicians, seemed to benefit the most from strategically navigating institutional and non-institutional arenas, converting attention capital into resilient influence. Their pragmatic engagement somewhat reduces, but does not eliminate, precarity, as platform volatility may result in backlash.

Nostalgia shapes these dynamics distinctly. For researchers, it pertained to epistemic cohesion, which depended on the autonomy academic institutions and public trust in their remit. For climate activists and artivists, inspiration was drawn from moments of solidarity in the past; for rural residents and older citizens, it denoted times without social exclusion. In each case, nostalgia functioned as a mediator between legitimacy challenges and identity-based orientation to the public sphere.

Perspectives on Political Communication Landscape

Political communication, as anticipated, unfolded distinctly within institutional settings. Politicians participating in the study saw themselves as stewards of a functional

democratic system. In this role, they regarded their strategic use of digital platforms as effective in fostering public engagement. Their pragmatic approach describes political communication taking place in a performative arena where public visibility becomes a prerequisite for influence and resilience. From this perspective, the political landscape is increasingly shaped by scandals and outrage, where coarse rhetorics are only partially filtered by the professional lens of journalists. Social media´s viral logic, politicians noted, intensifies confrontational exchanges even in the settings of institutional politics. In the Parliamentary Question sessions speeches are now crafted for the deliberate intent of virality:

> *"Parliamentary speech is not about addressing fellow MPs or TV viewers. Much more important is to produce a video clip out of them. As almost everyone in the Parliament is doing it, the messages that come across in social media accounts tend to be sharper than what it used to be like." Jukka Virtanen, male politician*

Editing opponents' remarks into meme-like video narratives exemplifies *programmed speech* (Dillet 2022) where politicians speak to algorithms, prioritising their platforms over institutional dialogue. This pervasive media logic reveals a tension within parliamentarism: the democratic function of the institution becomes partially subordinated to performativity.

While adept at digital affordances, politicians acknowledged the ethical dilemmas this approach entailed. It not only intensifies rhetoric but also constricts political discourse, favouring those who master a provocative, digitally attuned style, as one parliamentarian observed:

> *"It suits guys like me, who can quickly toss out snappy social media jabs. However, how about quiet and hard-working folks in politics, do they get the respect and media time they deserve? [--] Does the media reward those whose ideas citizens should really know about, or is the media only a playground for loudmouths like me? Andreas Lundahl, male, politician*

While ethical tensions in political communication culture were acknowledged, politicians tended to rationalise their practices by distinguishing public-facing rhetoric from policy work in closed committees or semi-private networks. Consistent with Goffman´s (1959) *front-stage–backstage* framework, they perceived viral clips and social media exchanges as public

performative acts. Representing both government and opposition, participants conceded engaging personally in heated and occasionally acrimonious disputes on X, tied to the divisive issues on state finances or sociocultural questions that fuelled schisms in 2024. Still, they emphasised that in non-public interactions with political opponents, the enduring values are trust and collegial respect:

> *"Despite disagreements, we all sit at the same table and discuss various matters. What is said with other parties' members and my own is staying there. Only another politician can truly understand what this work is like. [--] It is disheartening that people do not always understand we [politicians] are not fighting all the time." Tiina Tukiva, female, politician*

Media reports in 2024 witnessed escalating frictions even in parliamentary committee work and other non-public forums[3], suggesting that public rancour may render the front-stage-backstage distinction increasingly fragile. Nonetheless, this distinction is still a tacit norm for professional political discourse: harsh public rhetoric is tolerated, while personal attacks on private life and breaches of trust are rejected. While acknowledging their role in intensifying political discourse, politicians tended to deflect responsibility for its gravest consequences, such as targeting vulnerable identities like religion or gender, onto external domains such as social media or journalism:

> *"A line is drawn at attacking someone's appearance, religion, family, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Opinions or actions can be rebuked, but there is a line that will not be crossed. Now, somehow, personal attacks seem more acceptable, posing a massive ethical problem." Jukka Virtanen, male, politician*

Civic Critiques: Exclusionary Rhetoric and Polarisation

While politicians voiced faint hopes that citizens would acknowledge that, behind the scenes, policy issues can be resolved amicably, this perspective found little resonance among other focus groups. Their assessments of the political landscape were derived from the front-stage speeches, debates, and social media posts. Political language, often crafted for viral impact,

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[3] https://yle.fi/a/74-20118664

was described as confrontational, dismissive, or even harmful, creating barriers to meaningful engagement and raising doubts about the inclusivity of democratic processes.

Unlike many politicians, who thought that acerbic language contributes to public visibility, most civic actors argued that it eroded trust and safety in public discourse. The harsh tone of snappy video clips produced from plenary sessions was seen to set a troubling precedent. Youth representatives emphasised a lack of *intergenerational accountability*, arguing that this combative style normalises antagonism, shaping societal norms:

> *"At a summit with about 80 young people in attendance, the youth were astonished by MPs saying discriminatory things in the Parliamentary plenary sessions. Even if they keep insulting each other, and nothing happens. Decision-makers seem untouchable." Noora Linna, female, youth worker*

Such emotionally charged rhetoric was widely perceived to drive affective polarisation, casting opponents in the harshest possible light to provoke division and discouraging participation, especially among the youth. As a result, some participants noted that it felt safer to participate through intermediary platforms – associations, unions or advocacy groups – which could mediate the tone and provide collective cover against abuse.

Media practices that prioritise sensationalism further amplify polarising tendencies, turning complex policy questions into binary conflicts. One podcaster coined the pattern "an obsession with malice", describing how inflammatory political language fuels societal discord that permeates journalism:

> *"As someone quite left-wing, I am at unease with leftist politicians who start their nearly every social media post with finger-pointing. Once they have pinned the culprit, they start to explain their opponents' mischievous motives. A well-known politician started his Facebook post by saying that `Now that the government has decided to trample on the weak...´ This sort of cynicism has found its way to journalism, too." Arvid Hakala, male, podcaster*

Framing debate around blame rather than self-reflection underscores how the media environment's affective intensity leaves little space for nuanced discussion. For many, the

public sphere felt more like a stage for competing narratives. Rather than positioning themselves outside of this field, participants admitted that their critiques and counter-narratives did not unpack polarisation but rather exacerbated it.

Exclusionary political rhetoric strikes the hardest at those already on the margins. In Finland, immigration, youth crime, and gang violence offer salient examples of public debates wherein voices of migrant communities have been largely absent. The participants in the group for ethnic minorities argued that political discourse leaves little space for the underlying causes of social problems. In their view, youth involvement in gangs reflects structural inequalities and segregation rather than cultural background:

> *"First, we should tackle segregation and how housing policies cause it. When certain groups are packed together, poverty, distress, and unemployment all pile up in one spot. There is nothing new in it. We saw the during the economic recession in the 1990s with the general population. Fixing that was very costly indeed." Jean-Claude Musaka, male, migrant integration worker*

Such reductive narratives, amplified by the tabloid press and social media, made it harder for these communities to feel part of the democratic conversation. Rural communities felt similarly overlooked, with political rhetoric often portraying livelihoods like farming, forestry, or hunting as backwards or environmentally harmful. These narratives ignored the economic and cultural realities of rural life, reinforcing a sense of invisibility in a public sphere dominated by urban perspectives.

> *"My friends in Helsinki often think that everyone here votes for the Finns Party. That everyone is old-fashioned, parochial and hates minorities. There might be some truth in that, but that's not the whole story. I don't think people necessarily think so badly of each other, but somehow this division is at the back of their heads." Sanna Talonpoika, female, rural resident*

Although views diverged on how severe affective polarisation had become, most participants agreed that exclusionary rhetoric – whether marginalising communities or fuelling tribalism – strained public discourse. Researchers in the experts' focus groups were especially worried about its impact on the production of public knowledge. Binary framings make it challenging

to communicate uncertainty, nuance, or evolving evidence. Their concern echoed controversies during the pandemic in which complex scientific debates were recast as straightforward pro- or anti-vaccination positions. Participants added that a polarised environment can dampen scholars' motivation to engage in the public discussion and prompt institutions to advise silence on contentious topics in the fear of backlash. Overall, their critiques emphasised how emotionally charged rhetoric easily politicises knowledge: researchers now face frequent accusations of bias or activism, paralleling critiques on other public institutions such as the public broadcasting company.

> *"The hostile rhetoric targeting researchers aligns with the politicisation of YLE. We've seen similar campaigns in Britain and beyond. It's fiercely aggressive in Finland right now." Marja Aaltola, female, researcher*

Several participants noted that public scepticism falls disproportionately on humanities and social sciences, particularly on topics such as gender studies or immigration, which some political voices frame as ideologically or economically dispensable. Recently, this dynamic has become particularly prominent in annual debates over research funding decisions by the Academy of Finland, where individual grants—often for projects perceived as obscure or trivial by non-experts—are called out in social media to question the legitimacy of publicly funded research altogether.

"Polarisation makes it hard to voice doubts. That is why it is so dangerous"
Sari Lahtinen, female, researcher

In sum, civic actors essentially traced polarised political discourse to a top-down spiral, driven by acrimonious political rhetoric and amplified media logics. Politicians, in turn, located the main problem in journalistic framing and social media dynamics. This suggests that the public sphere suffers from a feedback loop, with politicians, journalism and social media all amplifying increasingly divisive political debate. However, underneath, a deeper force drives this cycle: commercialism, deeply embedded in the political culture and everyday life of Western societies. Casting citizens as consumers (Bauman 2007) compelled to vie for limited attention, this logic normalises adversarial communication and incentivises extremes, often ensnaring even those who seek to counter it.

Commercial Imperative in Public Communication

The 21st century marks an epochal shift characterised by the prioritisation of market logic across all political and social life (Brown 2003). Whether framed as *cannibal capitalism* (Fraser 2022) or *neoliberal rationality* (Couldry 2010), critical arguments underscore that identities and communication are subordinated to economic metrics, rendering participation in public discourse as a transactional process. Consistent with prior critiques of clickbait journalism and platform capitalism, participants in this study echoed these concerns, describing the current communication environment as "overly commercialised".

However, as non-institutional media actors, striving to shape public discourse, they are compelled to navigate the same market-driven affordances of the attention economy (Wu 2017), where public visibility remains a critical recourse for all participants. This paradox prompts them to adopt ethically ambiguous strategies they would otherwise criticise or abstain from. In this chapter, we examine how non-institutional media actors perceived commercialism´s influence on their public participation, focusing on three key themes: attention as contested currency; ethical dilemmas of self-commodification and the erosion of democratic ideals.

Attention as Contested Currency

The participants in this study demonstrated acute awareness of the pervasive dynamics of the attention economy. As highlighted in discussions on democratic legitimacy (chapter 6.1), the attention capital is not evenly distributed, nor is it inherently transferable across contexts, and different actor groups pursue and acquire it in distinct ways. While politicians and researchers also leveraged institutional legitimacy to enhance visibility, activists or influencers relied on independent efforts to advance political objectives or establish prominence in competitive labour markets.

Engaging in public communication in this environment was described as a form of entrapment, which one podcaster likened to an intractable arms race:

> *"It is a vicious game-theoretical predicament where all actors feel compelled to survive. It resembles the nuclear arms race: as you cannot trust others to disarm, you must keep maintaining your arsenal." Tommy Kallio, male, podcaster*

This logic easily ensnares even those who criticise the system. Climate activists, who, despite advocating for systemic reform for alternative economic models, admitted that they adapt to the same attention-driven imperatives. Their reliance on spectacular tactics aligned them with the commercial logic they seek to challenge, underscoring the pervasive influence of the attention economy. As one environmental activist reflected:

> *"You must keep raising the stakes [--] Drones, helicopters, 100 000 people… What else can you do?" Aada Mänty, female, activist*

> *"We are all fighting for that space there"*
> *Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Frequent use of martial and crisis metaphors, such as "fight", "struggle", "escalation" or "survive" in the discussions reflects asymmetrical power relations, with participants perceiving themselves as underdogs compelled to operate under constraints imposed by dominant actors. Such language reveals a lack of fair play with increasingly stringent rules. Concurrently, this line of thought signals that competitive and affective logic in the media environment and public communication has become hegemonic. Rhetorical combat may not be a choice but a prerequisite for participation. Discussants acknowledged an underlying paradox, as many felt obliged to harden their expression, while knowing that it would sustain the divisive discursive climate they criticise. Much like politicians who hoped citizens might glimpse the collaborative "backstage" of their work, influencers expressed frustration at being misperceived due to this necessity:

> *"I have to craft my posts and reels with sharp intensity to capture attention. That is why people may perceive me as intimidating. In real life, I am a much gentler person." Marja Halla, female, influencer*

While effective for capturing attention, such strategic exaggeration risks escalating disruptive behaviours, particularly among youth, where the platforms would incentivise what Quandt (2018) terms *dark participation*. The participants in the focus group for the youth explained this dynamic:

> *"If you break down the logic, posting malicious content or doing something outrageous it will likely get you more likes. The youth explained how*

> *addictive it is when posts gain likes. This can drive you to produce increasingly radical or worse content to keep getting more likes. These platforms tap into the natural need to belong to a group."*
> *Tuula Puro, female, youth researcher*

Likened to school bullying, where power derives from the subjugation of others, the youth group emphasised how this logic amplifies toxic interaction in public communication. Also, other marginalised groups had faced problematic forms of empowerment, where visibility, even if negative, affirms public existence for those who are usually invisible in the system. Ethnic group participants highlighted how attention or tabloid coverage validates youth involved in gang-related activities:

> *"When kids acting out with crimes see their names out there in the tabloids, they start believing that stuff. They think, 'that is who I am.' Like, 'Hey, I am a tough guy now.' It is super toxic." Ali Nur, male, migrant youth worker*

Access and Tactics: Participating in Public Communication

Even within a robust democracy like Finland, participants experienced persistent obstacles to public participation, such as market-driven filtration, technological asymmetries, cultural discounting, and identity-linked costs. In the meantime, their discussions revealed significant agency, utilising strategic engagement, creative resistance, and accessible digital platforms to amplify their voices or promote change.

While much of this participation occurs in mediated settings, it is essential to acknowledge that these tactics also encompass private conversations, community gatherings or public events. Moreover, participants´ reflections highlighted the pivotal role of collective structures, particularly NGOs, advocacy groups, and associations, in shaping access to public discourse. Although civil-society organisations were not a central analytic focus in the discussions, they surfaced repeatedly as crucial intermediaries that confer legitimacy, pool resources, and lend protection for marginalised voices. Their presence, therefore, merits recognition as a key infrastructural element in Finland´s landscape of participation. In this subchapter, we present these participation tactics, detailed in Table 4.

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Table 4. Tactics in Public Communication

Tactic	Description	Outcomes/ Barriers
Intermediary Advocacy	Navigating established gatekeepers by participating in public communication through delegated visibility via organisational spokespersons, unions, advocacy groups or NGOs.	**Outcome:** Collective legitimacy, pooled resources and expertise; access to formal consultation channels (hearings, parliamentary committees); lower personal risk and time burden **Barrier:** Organisational gatekeeping may dilute diverse voices. Slower, bureaucratic decision cycles can lead agendas to drift toward professionalised lobbying rather than grassroots priorities.
Media Collaboration	Influencing gatekeeping by building relationships with journalists, pitching stories, and tailoring content.	**Outcome:** Broad visibility, media and public influence, agenda setting for prominent actors. **Barrier:** Market-driven filtration and media biases limit success for less active or resourced groups.
Audience and Community Building	Direct cultivation of audience communities and networks through ongoing engagement and trust-building across mediated and non-mediated contexts.	**Outcome:** Sustainable support networks, long-term influence, loyal community engagement **Barrier:** Time-intensive, requires consistent presence, limited scalability compared to viral strategies.
Creative/ Resistant Tactics	Bypassing the gatekeepers through creative formats and strategies (e.g. purposeful polarisation) to challenge norms, including media content (e.g. memes, counter-ads) and non-mediated acts (e.g. art, public protests)	**Outcome:** Policy impact, viral and public reach for creative actors. **Barrier:** Media preference for sensationalism limits coverage of complex or systemic issues, and polarisation risks alienating audiences.
Platform Selection	Deliberate choice or avoidance of platforms to align with communication goals, target audiences, safety or ethical concerns.	**Outcome:** Direct engagement, ethical alignment, safer space for all actors. **Barrier:** Toxic platforms or limited reach on niche platforms restrict participation, especially for less tech-savvy groups.
Privacy and Boundary Management	Limiting visibility through self-censorship, privacy boundaries or reduced engagement in both mediated and non-mediated contexts to avoid backlash or personal risk.	**Outcome:** Protection of mental health, personal and community safety. **Barrier:** Reduced visibility and silenced voices, particularly for those heavily reliant on withdrawal.

Intermediary Advocacy

Deeply rooted in Finland's robust tradition of associational life, intermediary advocacy emerged as a pivotal tactic for public communication, particularly for marginalised actors. Whether farmers mobilising through Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), LGBTQ+ minorities via Sexual Equality Association (Seta), Romani and migrant professionals through specialised NGOs, climate activists under Extinction Rebellion and Greenpeace, or artists via cultural magazines, these collective structures were often described as essential intermediaries for accessing public communication.

These intermediaries delivered four forms of leverage. First, they conferred procedural legitimacy and credibility, enabling actors to access institutional arenas that are often closed to individuals. By lending formal recognition, organisations facilitated participation, for example, in parliamentary hearings or granted access to politicians or authorities:

> *"I was involved with Elokapina [Extinction Rebellion] for a couple of years, then we started a new environmental organisation with a few friends. Now, we lobby and meet directly with decision-makers, operating in the space between science and politics." Niko Saaristo, male, climate activist*

While some participants who questioned the legitimacy and significance of such public hearings (see chapter 6.1.), their continued participation points to a pragmatic calculation: despite their flaws, these institutional channels are available to pursue potential influence in public policies.

Beyond institutional access, organisations also shield individual participants from risks that exposure to public visibility may entail. This protection proves particularly crucial for vulnerable groups such as youth or minorities, who face potential hostility or stigmatisation in the public domain. A youth worker from Seta explained the organisation's protective approach:

> *"Journalists keep asking us for interviewees to share their lived experiences. They want to put queer teens on camera, and far too often, they ask questions about discrimination: 'Tell us how badly you were treated at school.' Our rule is simple: we do not allow young people to be placed in*

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situations where we cannot be sure they will be treated respectfully."
Virve Alava, X, youth worker

Similarly, a Romani advocate described their crisis communication following a high-profile incident in 2024, where a Romani man shot his pregnant partner in a city centre, sparking widespread media coverage. Such crisis communication illustrates how even small organisations have professionalised their communication strategies. This shift response helped prevent widespread community backlash:

> *"After the news broke, I was afraid that we would be lynched in Finland. In the crisis, the organisation had to take a strong stance. I dared to speak loudly in public that the Romani community condemns such actions. Without effective communication, it could have easily turned against us so that our people might have become too intimidated to leave their homes."*
> *Gabriel Grönfors, male, Romani advocate*

While protection manages defensive communication needs, organisations also harness proactive strategies. This involves coordinating campaigns that leverage collective resources to frame issues strategically across social, local and legacy media, often using viral strategy to maximise impact. An artivist described such a successful campaign:

> *"I teamed up with an animal rights group to put out a viral counter-ad against caged chicken farms... We flipped a major retailer for months." Jukka Kallio, male, artivist*

Moreover, organisations provide individuals with a vital space for engaging public communication among like-minded groups, fostering communities of shared purpose that offer emotional, social, and logistical support to sustain advocacy. These encounters support trust-building through proximity and direct interaction, which many found more authentic than pursuing public dialogue in mediated environments. For example, a politician whose constituency covers rural areas highlighted the importance of traditional face-to-face groundwork, meeting people in their surroundings. This practice suggests that another reality of political communication very much exists alongside viral rhetoric:

> *"For me, it is more important to participate in local village festivals than be on the front page of Ilta-Sanomat [a Finnish tabloid]. Those who follow me*

> *don't read tabloids, but they attend festivals. Before social media,*
> *interactions took place on site, and this tradition remains very much alive.*
> *Associations and community gatherings constitute public spheres of their*
> *own kind." Erik Sundström, male, politician*

Media Collaboration

Many participants sought to steer public discourse by working behind the scenes with journalists. This form of media collaboration centred on cultivating confidential relationships, pitching story ideas and narratives, and packaging information to fit newsroom routines. Although largely invisible to audiences, these efforts were often labour-intensive and strategically orchestrated, underscoring journalism's enduring centrality even for non-institutional media actors who already command sizeable digital followings.

Media collaboration is a familiar and routinised practice for politicians and experts whose institutional positions and networks ensure them privileged access to news. While institutional credentials, such as academic degrees or political positions, help establishing a public status as a reliable actor, the nature of epistemic authority in the public sphere seems to be evolving. Collaboration tactics were also notably employed by influencers, artivists or climate activists, who described investing significant labour in preparing background materials, providing data, clarifying key messages, and tailoring contributions to the logics of news production.

For example, influencers' access to journalism was grounded in their niche expertise and self-generated, carefully cultivated follower base. One sustainability influencer highlighted the labour-intensive nature of her media engagement:

> *"I spend an insane amount of time backgrounding those stories. Just*
> *recently, I pitched an article idea to a journalist and then followed the*
> *process to ensure that the information in the story would be accurate. This*
> *took me two working days, because this was a thorough and long piece."*
> *Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Participants described their access to news as relatively easy insofar as "you know the right journalists". Both environmental activists and artivists emphasised the importance of understanding journalistic ethics, news values, and informal newsroom policies. Climate

activists invested heavily in media collaboration, engaging in strategic planning to navigate journalistic norms while also having to overcome the scepticism often associated with their relatively young age. Although they were usually sharply critical of commercial journalism, they acknowledged the importance of maintaining mutual trust and respect with journalists:

> *"To make the strategy truly effective, we need to give training to speakers, interviewees, and commentators. Core messages must be carefully crafted, and communications must be clear, starting from the first impression. It is a bit like sales work. You need to try convincing that person you are a good guy." Niko Saaristo, male, climate activist*

This strategic packaging, while effective for participants in accessing public discourse, reflects broader concerns about *churnalism*, where journalists increasingly depend on pre-packaged content rather than independently sourced reporting (Davies 2008). Such dependence is argued to erode autonomous judgment and undermine democratic quality (Jackson and Moloney, 2015). More than ten years ago, a Finnish study estimated that roughly 40 per cent of published news items were based on PR-supplied materials (Juntunen 2011), while in the UK the ratio was nearly 60 per cent (Lewis *et al.* 2008). A participant in the artivist focus group corroborated these patterns:

> *"I sell journalists a package that essentially includes all that they need to write. [--] I have a communication plan for each assignment. It is more or less the same as with how the media consultant firms do their job." Leo Sundgren, male, artist*

Audience and Community Building

While media collaboration focused on accessing established gatekeeping structures, audience and community building provide alternative pathways to influence. Many research participants engaged in public discourse through regular content production as a preferred approach, offering greater autonomy, creative control, and potential economic returns to conventional institutional employment.

This strategic orientation appeared particularly pronounced among Attention Workers navigating evolving professional landscapes where audience-based careers are increasingly on offer. Some journalism students expressed anxiety about market competition while

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simultaneously recognising that direct follower bases may be helpful for self-employment. The uncertainty about institutional pathways was evident in one student's reflection on professional recognition:

> *"I was listening to an award-winning journalist who started as a citizen journalist and ran his blog and YouTube channel. Later, he was asked to work for YLE [Finnish Broadcasting Company]. He has his own ways of working. This is a guy who has built his career as a self-made man. I have noticed that this type attracts younger audiences. When journalism students were asked about who they respected the most as journalist, this guy came first." Kyösti Kettunen, male, journalism student*

This account reveals how audience-built credibility increasingly competes with institutional training for professional recognition. Community building practices served interlocking functions, enabling economic innovation, political voice, and legitimacy construction within what Cunningham and Craig (2021) coined 'creator culture'—professional pathways based on audience cultivation that operate alongside traditional media industries.

The foundation of sustainable audience relationships rested on demonstrated competence in specific knowledge domains, though operating through different validation mechanisms than traditional education systems. One environmental activist exemplified this approach through intensive self-directed learning:

> *"In English, there is a good word, 'integrity'. The audience sees whether the homework has been done well. I have spent vast amounts of time studying all possible details, while sharing that process all the time." Aada Mänty, female, activist*

However, this earned approach differed fundamentally from superficial attempts at audience building. As one influencer observed:

> *"I know people who have started from scratch, abandoned their day jobs and said, I'm going to be an influencer. I'ts incredibly confusing to me. They may have 5,000 followers, but that does not necessarily mean they have _influence_." Petra Noor, female, influencer*

Content creators aim to develop deep technical knowledge to address audiences that are inadequately served by mainstream media channels. As participants described their approach, they "live and breathe that specific topic," developing niche expertise while generating sustainable income streams and creative autonomy.

Sustained audience engagement requires what audience studies term 'relational labour' (Baym 2015)—ongoing work to maintain parasocial connections through consistent presence, community development, and responsive interaction. Several participants emphasised that community curation involved creating engaging spaces for audience members. Influencers said they had developed sophisticated strategies for managing platform environments:

> *"I block quite quickly those who do not know how to discuss properly. I also go and check my colleagues' accounts. If I see troublemakers on someone else's account, I block them from my account right away, so they will not be able to bring their bad habits onto my followers. I do not want my community to be exposed to inappropriate comments."*
> *Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Creative and Resistant Tactics

While intermediary advocacy and media collaboration involved adaptation to established systems of publicity – navigating and engaging with the gatekeepers – participants also employed a range of creative and resistant tactics aimed at disrupting or reconfiguring public discourse. These tactics encompassed producing alternative content and creating new formats such as reels, videos, podcasts, or memes, and experimenting with resistant actions such as protests, viral campaigns, secret galleries or street art. Their goal is to gain public attention through disruption by changing the tone or circuitry of public communication.

One key feature of these tactics was their temporal variability. On one end, slow-paced formats like podcasts allowed in-depth, nuanced dialogue to contrast the rapid and conflict-driven cycles of mainstream journalism. Podcasters said that their medium's slow pace helped introduce perspectives often absent in mainstream news media.

> *"It is hard to imagine the TV host at A-studio [a daily current affairs show on YLE] responding to a politician, 'hey, for real, can't you just say it*

straight?' In a podcast, it is different. There are just two people in the room, no camera crew. That whole setup for political conversation is human-to-human." Arto Kivi, male, podcaster

At the opposite temporal extreme, fast-paced formats like memes and counter-ads compressed social critique into instantaneous bursts of affective impact. These vernacular visuals leverage satire and cultural codes that contradict journalism's commitment to objectivity. Artivists, operating in the meme-sphere – an increasingly central platform for political activism (Mihăilescu, 2024) – used humour to provoke emotional responses and amplify visibility. This format enables articulating social commentary from a personal and moral perspective.

"With memes, humour just works super effectively. It brings attention to the issue. [--] Feminists had been talking about this since the 1980s. People who probably never take their arguments seriously were reachable through humour—it broke through their defences. [--] As a result of this, your message comes across. Once they have seen it, they can no longer unsee it." Sofia Salmela, female, artivist

Participants also said they tend to manipulate emotional intensity to achieve different tactical effects. Climate activists leveraged emotionally charged tactics in online spaces to provoke reactions and expand their supporter base. By employing deliberately polarising rhetoric, they seek to challenge systemic consensus underlying the key public policies, such as those related to Finland's self-image as a progressive and sustainable nation. While waging conflict to catalyse democratic debate, activists were prepared for an inevitable backlash.

"Finns tend to think that our society's top-notch on every standard. Even if wrongdoings or faults were exposed, our moral self-image would hardly budge. That is why you sometimes need to use really in-your-face language – even demonising your opponents – because it stirs the debate. [--] It is always tricky, though, as if you are putting real people's heads on the chopping block." Niko Saaristo, male, climate activist

> *"Polarisation is good because it compels you to take a stand. There´s no longer an option for not having an opinion."*
> *Aada Mänty, female, activist*

Confrontational communication strategies culminated in physical actions designed to incite public attention. Months before the focus group discussion, climate activists had painted the columns of the Parliament House blood-red, an action that sparked widespread public debate. Despite criticisms and calls to prohibit Extinction Rebellion's activities, the participants in the activists' focus group deemed the demonstration successful. One participant hoped that neither collaborative media tactics nor public criticism should dilute the movement's confrontational ethos:

> *"I was happy that we provoked such strong reactions—it means we did something real. Yes, it is awful when people want to silence us, but we should not let the criticism tame us. The danger is that we polish our strategy until we stop those disturbances that make people stop and ask: which one is more dangerous—red paint on the columns or burning rainforests?" Silja Rautio, female, climate activist*

Platform selection

Navigating the digital public sphere begins with platform selection. It is a practice with which all participants actively shape their visibility, credibility, and safety in public communication. When discussing this in the focus groups, they tended to use spatial metaphors to describe the platforms. One researcher in the experts' focus group characterised X as *"a rough late-night bar debate to be controlled with mute and block buttons".* In the meantime, a politician called the same platform *"an extension of the parliamentary floor".* Such language underlines that platforms were not perceived as neutral utilities but as culturally encoded venues whose atmosphere sets expectations for style and tone of communication and risks involved.

Visibility goals were central in shaping these platform choices, with participants carefully aligning their selections with assumed target audiences. Politicians typically aimed to maintain platform omnipresence, moving fluidly between X, Facebook, Instagram and local newspapers depending on their functionality. X was deemed appropriate for agenda setting,

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Facebook for constituency work, Instagram for addressing the youth, and local newspapers for older voters. Attention workers were far less mobile, as their livelihoods depended on a few visual or audio-first platforms.

Ethical positioning also influenced platform selection, with participants making choices based on concerns about data privacy, emotional well-being, misinformation, and corporate responsibility. For example, researchers said they had quit X to escape hostility, and many participants were worried about TikTok's data practices. Still, many conceded that a handful of dominant companies left few genuine alternatives. The selection of a platform thus often depended on the personal degree of complicity rather than independent moral judgment:

> *"I wish there were more variety in social media platforms. We have Meta and TikTok. If we lose one for them, where is the alternative? Just having one big player? I am not saying that TikTok is any better – probably not." Johanna Vartio, female, influencer*

The strategic nature of platform selection extended beyond audience targeting to encompass well-being and safety considerations. For example, rural actors emphasised the importance of less antagonistic platforms, such as Teams or LinkedIn, to organise "countryside meetups". In contrast, others said that they only participate under pseudonyms to minimise personal exposure. As one artivist explained, influence could still be exerted indirectly – "just let the memes do the work".

Privacy and Boundary Management

In contemporary communication environments, privacy is not merely individual preference; it operates as a strategic resource—*a civic skill*—for maintaining integrity and sustainability in the public domain. Across all actor categories, participants employed various forms of privacy protection, from selective disclosure to complete platform avoidance. Rather than signalling disengagement from democratic participation altogether, these practices reflected efforts to renegotiate the terms of participation.

Many of the participants said they had become privacy management professionals through trial and error. Their strategies had been sophisticatedly developed through the accumulated experience of platform dynamics, audience expectations, and personal boundary-setting. The higher participants were in attention hierarchies, the more necessary

deliberate privacy protection tactics became. This became evident already in the group recruitment phase, as some non-institutional Attention Magnets were entirely unreachable through conventional means.

Highly visible actors, such as politicians, had developed a privacy management practice that could be characterised as *selective disclosure. Many of them seemed to have a well-thought-out list of things in their private lives that would not reveal in public.*

> *"There are boundaries that journalists cannot cross. Home is my private place, and that is my rule. I don't give interviews about private life or relationships. That is my way of preparing for situations where something would go wrong in my personal life. Once you have defined your boundaries, the media tend to respect them." Jukka Virtanen, male, politician*

Balancing authenticity with personal protection requires more complex navigation for those whose livelihood depends on audience engagement. Influencers and content creators aimed at developing *performative authenticity*—deliberately sharing personal experiences and vulnerabilities to generate audience connection while maintaining strategic control over private information. They seemed to follow distinctions between "private privacy", "public privacy", and "public publicity" (Jallinoja 2000), creating intimacy with followers through controlled personal disclosure while preserving essential boundaries.

> *"In the past, I did projects where my children were involved. Then I realised that I cannot hold my child responsible for my livelihood. That would be against my values. As a mother, I can, of course, write about family topics, but I will not include my children in the publication without their permission." Ingrid Nysten, female, influencer*

For Attention Hackers, privacy settings also had a political dimension. They relied on the power invested in secrecy and anonymity, as these enable them to reflect on social affairs and design and execute their disruptive campaigns without interference from those in power (Heikkilä 2020, 253). Such protection becomes essential when their politically controversial activities test legal boundaries, potentially threatening activists' future opportunities as their actions become digitally archived. This risk materialised acutely in summer 2025 when the news reported that an Extinction Rebellion activist had lost a promised position in the Prime

Minister's Office due to demonstration participation (HS, 6 June 2025). As one climate activist described personal risks, in case the identities of anonymous activists are disclosed:

> *"Consider Global Action Days—even if these events are energising, it is exhausting and stressful to be onsite. Then there is the aftermath. Those who dare to become publicly identified as activists and get arrested risk their personal lives. Their professional life is on the line." Oskari Berglund, male, climate activist*

Beyond selective disclosure and strategic anonymity, many participants employed *protective withdrawal* strategies that temporarily or permanently reduced their public visibility to preserve mental health or personal safety. These practices manifested across actor categories and reflected varying degrees of agency, ranging from voluntary choice to forced exclusion. For some actors, withdrawal marked marginalisation rather than strategic positioning. Ethnic minorities explained that digital public spaces offered no meaningful venues for discussing societal problems related to minorities or immigration. Participants found that engagement efforts tend to amplify rather than unpack discriminatory discourses. Rather than enabling democratic participation, platforms become sites of voice distortion and exclusion.

Withdrawal strategies also encompassed voluntary forms that signalled resistance rather than exclusion. Podcasters and young participants particularly said they had deliberately reduced their social media engagement while maintaining interest in monitoring and discussing politics in offline settings. In a way, their digital silence exemplified a political argument against the commercial logics that demand constant performance and self-commodification in exchange for public voice. Without the same explicit political objective, young people purposefully disconnect themselves from social media:

> *"There is a growing group of young people who have specifically made the choice not to use any social media platforms at all. When I send them a message on WhatsApp, I might get a response four days later because that young person does not use the app more than once a week." Aino Lehtonen, female, youth worker*

Navigating Finnish Public Communication

In this chapter we have examined how non-institutional media actors navigate Finland's public communication landscape, revealing a complex terrain where democratic participation unfolds through strategic adaptation, creative resistance, and selective withdrawal. While access was often described as readily available, public communication was by no means equally accessible to all. At least three interconnected obstacles could be identified:

1. Gatekeeping in the media and public communication is increasingly shaped by market-driven filtration. As a result of this, public visibility depends on attention capital exacerbating disparity between social groups and public actors with regard to whose voices will be listened to.

2. Cultural discounting devalues certain forms of knowledge while privileging dominant perspectives over marginalised ones.

3. Safety and emotional burdens emerge where harassment affects all participants with intensity correlating to visibility levels, while polarized discourse itself alienates many through its confrontational nature.

These obstacles generated adaptive responses among participants. Reform-oriented participants faced challenges when confronting institutional inertia even though activists and artivists possessed considerable resources for privacy protection to circumvent these obstacles. Climate activists emerged as tactical versatilists who simultaneously sought to disrupted established patterns of public engagement through protests and provocations while working effectively with journalists, decision-makers, and supportive communities. This approach differs decisively from ethnic minorities, who largely withdrew from confrontational public exchange due to lack of comparable resources and privacy management capabilities.

Adaptation-oriented politicians and content creators differed significantly in their methods. Politicians pursued platform omnipresence and sought protection from pressures primarily through effective management of information about their private lives—podcasters and influencers invested in cultivating dedicated followings and communities, which also provided them with economic security.

Restorative groups, including rural residents and older people, often retreated from platforms entirely when confronted with harassment. In addition, they felt restraint by commercial pressures in the platforms that undermined thoughtful exchange of ideas.

6. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

Public discourse in Finland is increasingly marked by ethical controversies that reflect deeper tensions in democratic communication within digital environments. Disputes over political speech—intensified by affective polarisation—often centre on the contested boundaries of acceptable expression. High-profile cases involving politicians, such as former minister Päivi Räsänen's Supreme Court trial over biblical remarks on homosexuality and the 2023 resignation of Finns Party minister Wilhelm Junnila following accusations of racism, exemplify ongoing conflicts involving freedom of expression, religious liberty, civic responsibility, and the regulation of harmful speech in Finnish politics.

Beyond political rhetoric, citizens increasingly voice concern over privacy and data protection. In 2020, a data breach to a psychotherapy centre—where sensitive patient records were exploited for extortion—and security failures in the information systems of Helsinki have raised public alarm over institutional accountability. Additional ethical problems have pertained to the harassment of journalists, youth activism disrupting established norms of public order, and spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories.

These incidents canvassed the discussions analysed in this report, not merely as current events but as direct experiences in which many participants were personally or professionally entangled. In this chapter, we examine *situated ethical practices* through which participants aimed to maintain democratic commitments while navigating these tensions. The analysis draws from the theoretical notion of *situated knowledge* (Haraway 1988), emphasising that knowledge and moral reasoning arise from lived experiences rather than universal principles. Thus, participants formulate ethical responses grounded in their everyday realities, drawing on culturally shared but contested understandings of democracy and communication. Rather than articulating entirely separate moral frameworks, they engage in complex negotiations over shared values, applying them differently according to their communicative positions and perceptions of democratic legitimacy.

These situated ethical practices are articulated at a time when existing communication governance frameworks struggle to meet contemporary challenges. The Council for Mass Media (JSN), Finland's primary mechanism of journalistic self-regulation, has seen a steady rise in complaint volumes, now leading to significant delays in case handling (JSN 2024). Simultaneously, communication disputes are increasingly resolved through judicial

institutions, as evidenced by the rising number of defamation cases, indicating that self-regulation mechanisms may be losing their capacity to mediate conflict.

Meanwhile, significant segments of public discourse—including influencer contents, activist messaging, and podcast debates—operate largely outside any formal systems of ethical oversight. Therefore, investigating how non-institutional actors construct their ethical frameworks is crucial for developing more inclusive and adaptive models of governance that reflect the full diversity of today's communicative practices.

This chapter shifts the focus from structural conditions to participants' ethical reasoning, looking at how personal ethics are formed in a dynamic communication environment. In doing so, it builds on the ethical perspectives introduced in previous chapters.

Identifying and Articulating Values

Despite occupying different roles within the attention economy and holding divergent views on democratic legitimacy, participants articulated several shared ethical commitments. Across all focus groups, the values of *justice, diversity*, *honesty*, *dignity and respect* consistently emerged as shared ethical principles.

Rather than abstract moral universals, these commitments functioned as democratic virtues and relational ethics, focused more on modes of public engagement rather than individual moral standards. This orientation takes distance from traditional professional frameworks that emphasise ideals such as objectivity, impartiality or truthfulness, while connecting to values such as justice, honesty, diversity, and dignity.

Justice emerged as one of the most deeply shared ethical values. This emphasis is unsurprising, as it is consistently shown in research that experiences of injustice are key motivators that tend to drive people to civic engagement and social action (Benford and Snow 2000; Barranco and Parcerisa 2023). Ethnic minorities traced their commitments to justice from specific historical moments when they had realised problems in Finnish society. One participant described her formative experience from the 1990s:

> *"When I came to Finland in the 1990s, I remember thinking that I had entered an equal society, a welfare society, and a just society. Then, I found myself asking, why do they talk about minorities in those tones? Is justice in this society just for the majority? I remember being told that 'look,*

immigration is still a new phenomenon in Finland, we just need to give it a little time, and things would turn better. Well, that was 30 years ago, and we are still having the same conversation. Nothing has changed." Sara Afshari, female, immigrant community worker

In this encounter, justice is understood as structural recognition rather than individual fairness. The participant's justice framework was developed through accumulated experiences of marginalisation that had generated frustration that had only deepened due to token policy gestures and superficial attempts at inclusion.

Climate activists said that they had faced a different but related challenge: translating what they perceived as an existential threat into a sustainable moral commitment. Their framework expanded beyond human-centred concerns to encompass what they called "intergenerational and global justice." One activist described this comprehensive approach:

"I care deeply about what happens to the nature, the environment, and the climate. I see humans as part of the web of life and the continuum of generations. Questions of justice, extend to other species, too. In summary intergenerational and global justice – that motivates me a lot." Laura Hietala, female, climate activist

This excerpt echoes feminist and postcolonial research where justice goes beyond individual rights, encompassing structural questions of recognition, redistribution, and epistemic inclusion (Fraser 1997; Young 1990). Climate activists perceived contemporary ethical problems primarily as inequality crises, wherein environmental and social injustices fundamentally intertwine. The existential threat created what some called a "place of horror," yet paradoxically also yielded moral clarity:

"When it starts to look like too gloomy, that the game is lost and that societies are on the verge of collapse. If nothing else, I can tell myself that 'okay, at least I tried to do something'." Oskari Berglund, male, climate activist

Both patterns reveal how sustained engagement with injustice— whether through exclusion or existential urgency—propelled participants to act. Their commitment to justice, grounded in lived experience rather than abstract ideals, underscores the situated nature of their

ethical practices and their motivation to challenge systemic inequities through public engagement.

Values Growing from Exclusion

Experiences of exclusion drove participants to champion *diversity* as one response to epistemic injustice, seeking recognition of varied ways of knowing rather than mere demographic inclusion. Their critiques, resonating with intersectional social analysis (Crenshaw 1989), distinguished superficial representation from substantive epistemic diversity, arguing that expanding demographic presence in the public sphere alone fails to address the value of different ways of knowing and understanding social reality.

A shared frustration of stereotypical representation and the lack of visibility for what they termed "ordinary life" united four Attention-Deprived groups—older participants, rural residents, ethnic minorities, and the youth. This desire cuts to the core of the attention economy. Rural participants voiced explicit criticism, calling for broader ideological and value-based diversity in journalism. One participant proposed institutional restraints to journalists' short-sightedness when it comes to sourcing:

> *"Journalists should have rules, not using the same person as a source more than twice a month." Aatos Kolumni, male, rural resident*

Such critiques reflected a deeper demand for structural change in how journalism sources knowledge and constructs public authority. The concern was not limited to underrepresentation but extended to the impoverishment of perspectives in public communication, where ideological uniformity or over-reliance on accredited voices was seen to undermine pluralism. Ethnic minorities provided a nuanced understanding of how seemingly inclusive practices mask exclusionary dynamics. As one youth worker explained:

> *"The media has ready-made roles for immigrants. 'Grateful immigrants' who praise their new homeland, 'victims of racism', or someone who downplays or ultimately denies racism." Ali Nur, male, migrant youth worker*

This observation highlights how epistemic gatekeepers operate: marginalised voices are called upon when they function as cultural informants or internal critics—figures who affirm,

rather than challenge dominant cultural assumptions. Similar dynamics emerged in discussions on expertise and authority. Participants referring to topics resonating with everyday life described how insiders' knowledge of, for instance, economy, public policies and services, was frequently disregarded while outsiders were granted the power to define their communities:

> *"I cannot accept that someone who completely opposes my religion is treated as a Middle East expert. That person is not an expert for us. At the same time, these experts sustain an image where we are only seen as a problem. Given that this is the pattern, we have no trust in authorities and the white society." Layla Al-Farisi, female, immigrant community worker*

These dynamics reflect broader problems in epistemic justice—the recognition of different knowledge systems requires structural change in how expertise is constructed and validated. These reflections suggest that genuine epistemic pluralism requires more than inclusion of diverse voices—it also demands recognition of different knowledge systems on their own terms, without being forcibly translated into dominant cultural or epistemological frameworks (Ylikoski and Ahva 2024). When epistemic difference is accepted only insofar as it conforms to Western secular rationalism, inclusion remains conditional (Fricker 2007).

While these critiques were especially prominent among ethnic minority participants, similar frustrations were voiced in other Attention-Deprived groups. Many criticised journalism's tendency to portray communities as monolithic, ignoring internal diversity. These concerns underscore the need for intersectional approaches that acknowledge overlapping and shifting identities, and the challenge of making pluralism genuinely meaningful in both journalism and public discourse.

Values Shaped by Communicative Contexts

One of the central values traditionally structuring interpersonal communication and journalistic practice is *truthfulness*—the principle that communication should not be deceitful. This value of truthfulness emerged in focus group discussions, but often in a the form of *honesty*, which can be understood as engagement with truthfulness as a virtue (Williams 2002). This approach challenges the distinction between factual accuracy and

personal integrity, revealing it as a complex ethical principle responding directly to erosion of institutional trust and digital communication fragmentation.

Different groups approached honesty through distinct yet overlapping frameworks. Researchers voiced concerns about the erosion of truth that undermines democratic foundations while emphasising the importance of acknowledging epistemic uncertainties. Politicians, while acknowledging strategic communications as inherent to politics, highlighted the ethical importance of staying true to one's values.

Conceptions of honesty often emerged as responses to the challenges of participants' communication environments. Podcasters argued for developing particularly nuanced practices that combine factual accuracy with open disclosure of interpretive frameworks. Their commitment to honesty appeared deeply emotional rather than purely procedural, as some described experiencing visceral discomfort when potentially spreading misinformation:

> *"Publishing an error in a YouTube video feels extremely unpleasant. It is not nice at all. I try to be as accurate as possible with my words. If there is something I don't remember clearly, I say, 'Now I am not quite sure of this.' So, I try to convey that uncertainty to the audience as well as possible."*
> *Arto Kivi, male, podcaster*

Emotional investment in accuracy extended beyond factual verification to what could be called transparent authenticity or "epistemic humility", as podcasters coined it. It denotes an attempt to cultivate appropriate uncertainty toward knowledge claims and openly acknowledging limitations in interpretations:

> *"I try to impose epistemic humility both on myself and on those I interact with in my podcasts. I advice my guests to take a deep breath when they don't know what to say and explore what they feel is worth of saying. There is no rush." Tommy Kallio, male, podcaster*

This understanding highlights podcasters' distinctive position within the media environment and their self-conception as facilitators of exploration of complex topics, with their credibility relying on personal accountability to followers. Their openness contrasts with traditional journalism's focus on verification and avoidance of interpretive uncertainty. While journalism

researchers have promoted transparency as a path to renewed trust, such practices often remain superficial and even tactical, disclosing mainly details that are either harmless or beneficial to the media organisation (Heikkilä and Väliverronen 2016; Koliska 2021; Vos and Craft 2016). By contrast, the form of transparent authenticity discussed here reflects a more profound commitment to accountability, one that includes vulnerability, acknowledgement of interpretive limitations, and emotional investment in audience well-being (Plaisance, 2007).

The podcasters' emphasis on epistemic humility gains broader significance when considered alongside researchers' critiques of contemporary truth discourse. Researchers noted that appeals to "truth" often serve rhetorical battles rather than genuine democratic deliberation, creating what they called "truth moralising":

> *"Criticism of untruths easily leads to a complete disappearance of dialogue. In politics, we witness truth moralising where the opponent's speech is automatically labelled as disinformation, propaganda, or outright lying. In this context, truth is a dangerous concept. A better way to understand truth is to evaluate correspondence with how things are, while admitting that we have no direct access to the world of truth. In discussions, truth is a goal, but we should start from the assumption that truth is something that differs from our own conceptions." Jukka Peltomaa, male, researcher*

Values Rooted in Interpersonal Encounters

In contrast to justice and honesty, which emerged from systemic concerns, dignity, respect and care were shaped by participants' relational roles and responsibilities in interpersonal and digital encounters. They manifested situated ethical practices that varied across groups rather than as uniform abstract ideas. Among politicians' focus groups, respect was framed as a personal boundary enabling adversarial debate without dehumanisation. One participant explained:

> *"I can criticise harshly Andreas' [another politician participating in the focus group] opinions or actions, but there is a certain line of things we do not cross. This is a kind of respect for human dignity. That is my rule of play." Jukka Kallio, male politician*

DIACOMET

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Ruling out attacks on appearance, religion, family, ethnicity, or gender allowed democratic contestation without personal destruction, echoing long-standing principles in media ethics that emphasise the protection of human dignity (Christians *et al.* 2020). Influencers extended the same principle to their relations to followers. They developed nuanced strategies for maintaining safer communicative spaces through proactive community management:

> *"I quite quickly block those who do not know how to discuss properly. I also go and check my colleagues' accounts. If I see troublemakers there, I block them preventively, so they would never end up onto my account. I do not want my community to be exposed to their comments."*
> *Marja Halla, female, influencer*

This approach reveals how protective respect functions not merely as reactive moderation but as anticipatory care that monitors broader platform dynamics to prevent harm before it reaches community members. Their practices reflected an *ethic of care,* marked by attentiveness and responsiveness, that exceed conventional journalistic standards and highlight the emotional labour involved in platform-based communication (Tronto 2013). Older participants emphasised relational respect through listening and the validation of everyone's life experiences. One participant stated:

> *"What comes to mind regarding these values is dignity, meaning a respectful encounter. To listen to life stories and the difficulties that everyone goes through in life. The value of listening comes naturally when you think about how to treat older people today."*
> *Marja Rantala, female, elderly care worker*

Podcasters, in turn, articulated respect as an intellectual practice, valuing openness and sincerity over rhetorical dominance. One participant noted:

> *"I would discuss with anybody as long as they remain honest and not just trying to win the conversation." Janne Susi, male, podcaster*

Here, the podcaster sets the dialogic method as selection criterion, as he reflects on which voices he could give space onto his platform. This procedural framing echoes ideals of deliberative democracy, which emphasise inclusive, reasoned dialogue. Across participant groups, respect was consistently tied to recognition of difference and a refusal to devalue

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others. Whether through protecting vulnerable followers, validating life stories, or maintaining principled disagreement, respect was enacted not only as politeness but as a situated response to power asymmetries and communicative risk.

Constructing Personal Ethical Frameworks

While values such as justice, diversity, honesty, dignity, and care provided common ground for many, their application required individual interpretation and adaptation to specific communicative contexts. These negotiations prompted participants to construct personal ethical frameworks. When asked about their ethical commitments, most participants did not rely on abstract definitions. Instead, they responded with detailed narratives of formative encounters or dilemmas. This approach reveals how value articulation functions as an ongoing process of meaning-making rather than as the declaration of fixed principles.

This narrative approach served multiple functions. For many participants, it was not only a mode of self-reflection but also a means of engaging in public discourse and producing contents. By publicly sharing how their values had developed and justifying their decisions, participants referred to commitments that audiences could reference and contest, transforming personal reflection into a form of public accountability. Simultaneously, these public narratives invited ongoing feedback that participants applied to calibrate their ethical reasoning:

> *"It is possible that I have completely messed up and done something totally wrong. I have not thought about it that much, but because I have not received much feedback that I am misbehaving, I have always felt that, apparently, I am doing the right thing." Petra Noor, female, influencer*

This feedback-dependent approach reveals both the collaborative potential and inherent limitations of *networked ethical reasoning*. While audiences can serve as imagined ethical mirrors, providing sometimes real-time assessments of communicative choices, this reliance on community validation may reinforce existing biases rather than challenging them.

Notably, participants developed informal networks for ethical consultation and validation that compensated for absent institutional guidance. These peer relationships provided crucial support for maintaining ethical commitments under pressure, functioning as voluntary communities that shared knowledge about ethical challenges and developed

collective responses to platform-related dilemmas. However, the individualisation of ethical responsibility often left participants without robust support systems.

Beyond this interactive dimension, participants described their ethical reasoning as being largely intuitive. Nonetheless, significant differences became apparent. Researchers were, of course, supported by university ethics guidelines, and podcasters, journalism students, and influencers occasionally referred to ethical codes. However, most participants described proceeding with "their conscience as the driver." As one podcaster explained when discussing decisions about guest selection onto his platform:

> *"The choices tend to be intuitive. Sometimes my decisions feel bad or wrong in my heart." Janne Susi, male, podcaster*

Participants' experiential approach to ethics created both a sense of authentic commitment and a recognition of uncertainty. They generally trusted their own choices but were aware that their frameworks might fail to take into account some broader consequences. These limitations became particularly evident when participants reflected on the actions of others. Influencers, for example, expressed concerns not only about peers who lacked a clearly defined value system but also about the role of marketing agencies and companies in exploiting the void of ethical mechanisms. Without articulated moral boundaries, influencers were described as vulnerable to "all sorts of marketing interests" and likely to "agree to anything," making them easy prey for commercial actors seeking to benefit from their inexperience:

> *"Influencers are sometimes quite harshly taken advantage of—not necessarily because of their incompetence, but because they are not experts in the field. At some point, everyone is faced with an offer that forces them to examine their morality from multiple perspectives." Marja Halla, female, influencer*

Ethical Frameworks Clarify Through Value Conflicts

When speaking about their values, participants typically described difficult situations where they had to choose between competing priorities. This echoes John Dewey's (1932) insight about the nature of moral reasoning: our ethical principles develop when we face real problems, not through abstract thinking. Through encountering similar dilemmas

repeatedly, participants learned to prioritise specific values while staying flexible enough to adapt to new situations.

These choices often involve three key areas that communication scholars have identified as central to ethical action: what should be said and how (*communicative ethics*), to whom one owes loyalty (*relational ethics*), and what means are acceptable for pursuing goals (*tactical ethics*) (Christians *et al.* 2020).

The following examples illustrate how participants navigated these dimensions of the core values discussed earlier, not only to reveal individual ethical frameworks but also to identify broader value tensions in today's communication environment. Personal ethical frameworks expose critical gaps in institutional guidance for platform-mediated communication, and they also demonstrate how individuals adapt to systemic problems that institutions fail to address.

The pursuit of public attention in contemporary communication environments require action and messaging, where care and dialogue often conflict with self-interested strategic demands. In our analysis, care emerged most clearly among influencers who aim to cultivate their audience communities. Participants developed *care ethics* in response to platforms shifting social reproduction costs onto individual content producers, forcing them to manage the well-being of their communities without institutional support. Their practices extended beyond basic protection to stress receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness to specific community needs.

One influencer with a large following of young people and a focus on neurodivergent life clearly articulated various value-based decisions she must make:

> *"When I think about Gaza, I feel like I want to speak up about so much. However, knowing that how many young people follow me, is it helpful if they end up seeing shocking videos of kids being blown up? Is it worth it? Will it just leave them feeling shocked or helpless?"* *Johanna Vartio, female, influencer*

Ethics of care also manifested in her adaptive moderation practices, shaped both by her commitments to diversity and justice and by intimate knowledge of her specific audience:

> *"When you say that you have blocked with a heavy hand everyone who comments inappropriately... I don't want to do it even to those who turn out to be complete blockheads because I specifically want to tell them that autistic people and those having neurological conditions have a right to participate in the public sphere."* Johanna Vartio, female, influencer

Her ethical framework went beyond simple protective measures to emphasise receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness to specific community needs. Simultaneously, it required continuous sensitivity while accepting risks to her strategic visibility and personal reputation. Dialogue creation generated similar tensions. In our data, podcasters spoke about supporting constructive societal discourse:

> *"I started my podcast to create a constructive discussion culture. Rather than just discussing how we could discuss better, I wanted to put myself into those discussions."* Arto Kivi, male, podcaster

Podcaster's commitment extended beyond content production to active discourse facilitation, positioning their work as resistance to commercial logics that reward conflict over nuanced discussion. The listening built into dialogue and the effort to understand different voices continuously produced for podcasters the need to weigh the boundaries of acceptable speech, specifically, to whom should they give public visibility. In the following quote, the podcaster makes a distinction between unbounded *epistemic curiosity* (the drive to understand) and reasoned *moral endorsement* (acceptance or approval):

> *"In a way, I use my talk show for selfish purposes. I want to discuss things I want to know more about with help of people who can share their knowledge with me. My ethical guideline is to try to increase public understanding. Understanding is never harmful, and it does not mean that I would accept everything I try to understand."* Arvid Hakala, male, podcaster

Relational Ethics: Loyalty Navigation in Polarised Environments

Researchers expressed deep concern about the disappearance of dialogue in polarised communication environments. In such contexts, they said they must formulate their words more carefully to prevent misinterpreting as political advocacy. Traditional academic

commitments to deliberation and epistemic uncertainty become particularly problematic when any admission of doubt can be exploited in public debates. The stakes are high, as one researcher explained:

> "Some political movements are trying to undermine the autonomy of universities. Researchers should see how these dynamics is played out and position themselves accordingly. Inside universities, all arguments are hypothetical—we are part of a pluralistic discussion, so we don't hold strong positions. Of course, there are worldviews involved; I have no illusions about reaching consensus. However, institutional autonomy is crucial for having independent, critical thinking in society at all."
> Jukka Peltomaa, male, researcher

This external pressure intensifies researchers' perceived need to protect institutional credibility by avoiding controversial public positions. However, researchers simultaneously feel loyalty to their scientific disciplines and personal convictions, which may compel public engagement regardless of political risks. The same researcher articulated this tension:

> "Researchers have no obligation to remain technical or scientific experts only. Outside the university context, they have every right to be activists. Moreover, in my view, a sound social scientific methodology acknowledges that factual claims can carry normative implications. This may lead us to defend certain structures or institutions that align with truth-seeking and criticise practices based on false beliefs." Jukka Peltomaa, male, researcher

This context-dependent approach reveals the complexity of loyalty demands that researchers must navigate. Their dilemmas can be understood as at least three intersecting obligations: defending academic autonomy against external pressure, maintaining disciplinary and personal integrity, and satisfying organisational demands. Disciplinary and personal convictions may compel researchers to speak out when their findings reveal significant public concerns, even when such engagement would ensue accusations of activism damaging the institutional reputation they seek to protect.

Beyond these epistemological tensions, researchers face organisational pressures to comply with institutional policies and management directives. One researcher described

experiencing restrictions that we not imposed by the university but more broadly by contemporary political trajectories shaped by attention economy:

> *"Now that public funding to all universities is diminishing, we are supposed to be loyal to our institution and its management policies. Whether deliberatively or inadvertently, this means that we are forbidden to speak about some issues in the media."* Anu Nurminen, female, researcher

These organisational pressures conflict with both scientific integrity and democratic responsibility, creating a difficult choice between institutional compliance and professional ethics. This particular researcher said she gave preference to her professional ethics, though the discussion did not reveal how she had ultimately acted.

These competing pressures—political accusations of bias and institutional demands for silence—illustrate how researchers must develop personal frameworks for balancing democratic responsibility with professional survival. Rather than following predetermined rules, they navigate these dilemmas through ongoing moral reasoning that weighs institutional loyalty against public accountability.

These loyalty conflicts reveal fundamental tensions in contemporary communication environments that generate multi-directional demands that would be difficult for organisational guidelines to anticipate. Thus, institutional pressures may compel employees to communication they find ethically problematic. Researchers thus face not merely individual ethical choices, but structural contradictions that reflect broader challenges in platform-mediated democratic discourse.

Tactical Ethics: Means vs. Ends in Democratic Participation

The third situation requiring distinct ethical choices pertains to tactical considerations. Therein, participants are compelled to evaluate the relationship between chosen means and desired ends, and their justification. Climate activists exemplified this dilemma most clearly, as they confronted a question, whether and when environmental urgency justified disrupting established political processes. These conflicts centred on the tension between justice and non-maleficence—whether disrupting established systems justified causing immediate harm to individuals or property. One activist articulated this moral complexity when discussing property damage tactically:

"I sometimes wrestle with the question of whether it is acceptable to cause damage to property for a higher cause. When is it acceptable? I have not found a definitive answer to that. As part of a protest directed at a massively harmful fossil capitalist infrastructure, it might be justifiable—as long as it does not pose a direct threat to people or non-human animals."
Noora Kivistö, female, climate activist

Rather than resolving the tension between legal compliance and moral urgency deontologically, activists referred to consequentialist reasoning by evaluating actions by their potential to contributions to climate justice while minimising unnecessary harm. In the meantime, they drew clear ethical lines around endangering living beings.

Such individual moral calculations extended to strategic choices about gaining public attention. As detailed in chapter 6.4, activists trying to raise awareness of climate change found themselves adopting spectacular tactics that mirrored the very commercial logic they sought to resist. Although their foundational ethos was substantially based on climate science and procedurally on deliberative democracy, they were often forced to operate within commercial attention registers to break through to the public's awareness. This generated a value conflict between dignity and authenticity on one hand, and the instrumental demands of visibility on the other. Activists recognised that resisting capitalism paradoxically required engaging with its visibility logic—an ethical tension that demanded constant recalibration.

These dilemmas gave rise to tactical ethics: practical guidelines for choosing methods that balanced immediate disruption with long-term environmental goals. Rather than relying on fixed answers, activists returned repeatedly to consequentialist assessments between action and inaction: How to compare the harm from blocking a road to the scale of damages caused by climate inaction? To what extent does this act of property damage advance broader environmental goals, or would it result in backlash from public opinion?

Strategic dilemmas were embedded in the broader sense of collective responsibility. Disruption was not framed as exceptional or extremist but as part of responsible citizenship under conditions of ecological crisis. As one activist put it:

"If every responsible actor in society doesn't do their part to challenge these power structures, then I would say this game is lost."
Oskari Berglund, male, climate activist

This framing redefined tactical escalation as democratic obligation rather than a departure from democratic norms. By anchoring disruption in collective moral responsibility, activists could shift the ethical weight from personal justification to systemic necessity. The tactical ethics that emerged blended individual moral reasoning, strategic communication, and shared civic duty into flexible frameworks that allowed sustained activist engagement in the face of unresolved and recurring ethical tensions.

Ethics in Transition

In many focus group discussions, participants focused more on systemic ethical challenges in journalism, political communication, or platform design than on elaborating their moral frameworks. This reflects the methodological constraints set by a two-hour limit for self-reflexivity as well as the nature of public communication ethics, where individual and structural considerations are deeply intertwined. Nonetheless, values articulated by participants reflect ongoing efforts to address the ethical challenges of the current communication landscape—challenges that often surpass the scope of professional media ethics. Three key themes emerged as particularly significant:

Honesty as transparent authenticity and epistemic humility, suggesting that a traditional understanding of truthfulness in communication is insufficient and outdated in a polarised communication landscape.

Inclusive and epistemic diversity – moving beyond calls for socio-demographically and statistically balanced representation to acknowledging the negative effects of power asymmetries to the distribution of public attention and envisioning more diverse modes for public participation.

Democratic care – recognising varying communicative vulnerabilities and redefining care as not only protecting audiences but also empowering them, including respectful listening and mutual exchange of meanings to dialogic communicative values that contribute to collaborative truth-seeking and meaningful public connection.

In this context, participants often wrestled with balancing individual responsibilities with systemic challenges. While many felt personally accountable for their own communication failures—such as spreading misinformation, inciting polarisation, or causing collateral damage to audience members—they also argued that problems in communication ethics often go beyond individual control. This tension fostered a sense of ethical vulnerability: responsibility without sufficient power.

Participants' ethical practices were grounded in intuitive self-reflexivity bolstered by informal peer consultations. These included strategic boundaries — non-negotiable lines to protect core values while allowing flexibility in less critical areas — role-specific obligations, and temporal negotiation that enables adaptation over time without sacrificing ethical consistency.

While individualised ethical frameworks offer contextual sensitivity and authentic expression, they also introduce vulnerabilities:

Inconsistency: Without shared standards, participants' frameworks could lead to varied responses to similar situations, creating uncertainty and frustration.

Isolation: Ethical responsibility pertains to individuals, but it can become a personal burden without robust structural support to sustain ethical commitments.

Burnout: Maintaining a responsive and self-aware ethical stance in competitive environments requires significant emotional labour, which may result in participation fatigue or withdrawal from public participation.

Blind spots: Individually developed frameworks may fail to take account of systemic effects or unintended consequences of public communication.

7. Conclusion

This report analysing Finnish non-institutional media actors—comprising groups of politicians, experts, activists, influencers, podcasters, ethnic minorities, rural residents, youth, and older people—sheds light on the ethical challenges that contemporary communication environments impose to public participation and communication ethics.

The analysis progressed from participants' experiences of accelerating media environments (Chapter 5), through their interpretations of public communication (Chapter 6), to the situated ethical practices that emerge through their reflexivity (Chapter 7). The tensions identified along the way demonstrate that actors must navigate complex ethical dilemmas without clear institutional guidance, often balancing competing values under commercial, algorithmic, and social pressures.

The analysis reveals several concrete communication-related problems that shaped participants' daily engagement with Finnish public discourse.

Platform toxicity driving self-censorship: Harassment, doxxing, and hostile commentary compel actors to withdraw from public discussion, with the most potent effects among marginalised groups.

Polarisation eliminating nuance: The competition for public attention rewards firm and absolute opinions, leaving little room for uncertainty or epistemic humility. Simplified messaging often outperforms deliberative communication, making calls for dialogue appear challenging.

Commercial logic corrupting democratic dialogue: Media institutions and platforms optimise content for maximising clicks and users' screen time. This undermines the role of other standards for public communication, such as accuracy, fairness, and civic enlightenment. This created ongoing tensions for participants trying to maintain authentic engagement within attention economy constraints.

Journalistic bias and opinionated reporting: News coverage reproduces persistent stereotypes and biases while failing to ensure sufficient diversity of voices. Opinionated reporting incites politicised audience readings, which undermines public trust in news and distorts public understanding.

Exclusion of marginalised voices: Perspectives that lack commercial appeal or algorithmic traction often struggle to gain visibility. Structural criticism is frequently dismissed as too radical or unrealistic. This exclusion operates through both algorithmic amplification patterns and cultural expectations for acceptable discourse.

While many of these problems are almost universally familiar, participants ' emphasis somewhat differs from that in dominant (media) policy discourse. Institutional discussions on 'information disorder' tend to highlight disinformation and call for fact-checking and media literacy. However, these themes surfaced only marginally in focus group conversations. Clearly, most participants did not feel themselves inept at digesting information and skills in critical reading. Even if this sense of self-efficacy should not be taken for granted, it should direct attention to more institutional criticism. The participants were concerned about the lack of action contexts wherein public dialogue and participation would influence public policies (see, Couldry *et al.* 2009). Their focus was on securing access and attention, less on correcting misinformation.

Core Value Tensions and Ethical Ambiguities

Beyond practical communication problems, the study identified a set of value tensions that tend to develop into ethical dilemmas, such as the following:

Truthfulness vs. Strategic Positioning. Contemporary communication environments create pressure for strategic positioning, which can complicate commitments to straightforward truth-telling. Participants navigated this challenge by developing approaches that emphasised honesty and transparent authenticity, about being honest and sincere, and disclosing their perspective while maintaining genuine engagement.

Inclusivity vs. Boundary-Setting. While diversity and inclusion were widely endorsed values, their applications revealed underlying tensions about the boundaries of acceptable discourse. These tensions reflected deeper conflicts between liberal and rational worldviews on the one hand, and conservative, non-materialist and religious perspectives on the other. Particularly evident in ethnic minorities' experiences was that religious expression often has no legitimate place in public discourse. Firm commitments to diversity encountered implicit boundaries about which voices or perspectives remained unwelcome in inclusive dialogue.

Individual Responsibility vs. Collective Problems. Contemporary communication environments generate ethical dilemmas where individual actors feel responsible for systemic issues that go beyond their control. Participants experienced tension between taking personal responsibility for broader communicative problems, such as platform toxicity or audience welfare, while recognising these as fundamentally collective challenges requiring structural solutions rather than individual responses.

Transparency vs. Privacy: Authentic communication values have encountered significant tensions with personal protection needs. Contemporary public communication increasingly demands sophisticated privacy management skills as essential civic competencies, with those lacking such capabilities facing either withdrawal from public discourse or increased vulnerability to online harassment.

Finnish Fault Lines

While exploring communication problems and ethical tensions, the diverse participant groups and their discussions came to reveal a set of fault lines and developmental trajectories that themselves create communicative challenges while providing a distinctive national context for understanding ethical dilemmas. These social divisions reflect current demographic and cultural transformations that create tensions around voice, representation, and inclusion in public discourse. Although many of these divisions appear again across European societies, their specific configurations produce a distinctive layer of Finnish context for this research.

Rural-urban divide. Finland's population is increasingly concentrated in cities, leaving rural communities feeling overlooked. Participants from rural areas perceived urban-centred discourse as neglecting their interests, particularly when confronted by environmentalist agendas that conflicted with traditional livelihoods.

Multicultural transformation vs. homogeneous tradition. Mainly in the Helsinki region, demographic shifts have produced friction between emerging multicultural realities and long-standing assumptions of cultural sameness. Minority participants reported pressure to assimilate and abandon traditions to gain legitimacy.

Generational divides in an ageing society. Finland's rapidly ageing population generates tensions around voice and authority. Elderly participants felt increasingly excluded from

digital discourse, while younger participants felt sidelined from political decision-making that directly affects their future. Across several focus groups, participants themselves expressed intergenerational conflicts of interest and a lack of mutual understanding, making these divides a lived reality.

Commercial erosion of enlightenment ideals. Finland's tradition of enlightenment — anchored in grassroots cultural life—faces growing pressure from commercial media logic. Content producers of many sorts reported tension between epistemic patience and the need to act quickly in a polarised attention economy.

Trust divides in a high-trust society. Despite Finland's reputation for high institutional trust, cracks were evident. Participants criticised journalism for bias and exclusion, while minorities expressed mistrust toward "white Finland" and its ability to include them genuinely in public life.

Research Boundaries and Future Scope

As a qualitative study, these findings do not strive for statistical generalisations. Nonetheless, the extensively quoted material and cross-group comparisons provide firm empirical grounding and valuable insights into perspectives often absent in communication ethics research. These accounts offer a detailed picture of how Finnish non-institutional media actors in 2024 navigated ethically complex public life, often with limited support. Their strategies reveal both adaptive moral creativity and persistent uncertainty.

This report also lays the foundation for the next phase of the DIACOMET project, wherein the Finnish report will be submitted to comparative analysis with seven other country reports based on the same methodological setting and similar focus group data. The rich material gathered here—spanning multiple actor categories, ethical tensions, and national particularities—will enable comparative reflection on shared and divergent communication ethics across Europe.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Actor category	Focus group	N=/Gender (M/F/X)	Session date
1.	Attention workers	**Societal podcasters**	N=5 5/0/0	Apr 3, 2024
2.	Attention deprived	**Rural inhabitants**	N=8 4/4/0	Jun 6, 2024
3.	Attention deprived	**Young adults** field workers, NGOs and researchers	N=9 3/4/2	Nov 4, 2024
4.	Attention deprived	**Older people** + NGOs and researchers	N=7 1/6/0	Nov 6, 2024
5.	Attention hackers	**Environmental activists**	N=8 3/4/1	Nov 11, 2024
6.	Attention hackers	**"Artivists"**	N=7 4/3/0	Nov 26, 2024
7.	Attention magnets and attention workers	**Social media influencers**	N=6 5/1/0	Oct 15, 2024
8.	Attention magnets	**Experts** Researchers	N=8 3/5/0	Oct 21, 2024
9.	Attention workers	**Journalism students**	N=5 2/3/0	Oct 23, 2024
10.	Attention magnets	**Parliamentarians**	N=6 4/2/0	Dec 3, 2024
11.	Attention deprived	**Ethnic minorities**	N=7 4/3/0	Dec 9, 2024
	Total	N=11	N=76 37/36/3	