

Factual, sceptical, or beyond journalism?

Epistemological discourses in media users' perceptions of COVID-19 news

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Abstract

This study examines how individuals evaluate the legitimacy of knowledge in the context of journalism's crisis communication. Based on an exploratory sample, we analyse epistemological discourses constructed in Finnish media users' reflections on their engagement with and interpretation of COVID-19-related news and information. To examine these discourses, which we understand as encompassing both epistemological perceptions of reliability and authority, and as building blocks of collective identities, we conducted and analysed 14 semi-structured qualitative interviews with purposively selected media users. We identified three discourses. The first two are i) *Journalistic knowledge is sufficiently reliable* and ii) *Journalistic knowledge is just one side of the story*. These are micro-level discourses, i.e. participants' individual perceptions of information and news on the COVID-19 pandemic. The third discourse is iii) *Reliable knowledge existing beyond journalism*. This meso-level discourse refers to participants' observations of other discourses within their social and local communities. This study demonstrates the complex epistemological assumptions that inform understandings of reliable knowledge in the context of journalism, including media users' divergent perceptions of scientific knowledge. Our findings show that struggles over knowledge are shaped both by the ideological advocacies on which they draw and by the collective identities constructed within epistemological discourses.

KEYWORDS

epistemological discourses, epistemic crisis, discourse analysis, journalism, crisis communication

Introduction

During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the demand for timely and reliable information rises sharply. However, low trust in mainstream media and the proliferation of alternative information sources can erode a shared sense of reality and lead to an *epistemic crisis* (Andersen et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2018) in which people no longer share a common understanding of what constitutes trustworthy information or how such information is produced, consumed, and corrected, undermining the shared perception of reality (van Dalen, 2020). How individuals decide whether to trust the institutions responsible for producing and disseminating reliable knowledge about society is a central challenge in the age often described as the post-truth era (D’Ancona, 2017). An epistemic crisis is a crisis of collective trust, which is always imperfect, biased, conditional, and in constant need of re-examination (Haider and Sundin, 2022).

The fragmentation of shared epistemic understanding dates back to the late twentieth century, when modern political communities structured around ethnic groups, nations, religions, and social classes began to give way to new social formations (Bein, 2022). In the cultural politics of the 1980s and 1990s, increasingly shaped by identity politics, this transformation also raised questions of belonging (Fukuyama, 2018). The resulting epistemic crisis is therefore intertwined with collective identity, understood as a shared sense of group belonging developed through common experiences, values, beliefs, and goals (for belonging, see Cohen, 2022). Our aim is to examine this epistemic situation at an individual level by uncovering the premises that Finnish media users draw upon when evaluating the reliability of knowledge and information presented in news during times of crisis.

In Finland, trust in professional news reporting on COVID-19 was relatively high (Jallinoja and Väliverronen, 2021), and there was even a slight increase in the majority’s trust in experts, institutions, and news media during the pandemic (Reunanen, 2022). However, signs of declining trust and fragmented patterns of knowledge use also emerged among certain audience segments. For instance, over 40 percent of respondents reported a decline in their trust in journalists, while roughly one-third expressed the opposite (Tiedebarometri 2022). We find these shifts noteworthy, as a fundamental change in collective trust may reshape epistemic understanding and patterns of knowledge use – developments that warrant closer examination. By exploring epistemological discourses, we seek to deepen insight into the socially shared frameworks and

premises that media users build on when assessing the reliability and epistemic authority of various types of information.

The public sphere has been reshaped by changes in the epistemic status of knowledge and people's diminishing trust in fundamental democratic institutions. Waisbord (2018, pp. 1868–69) suggests that the collapse of the old news order and the chaos of contemporary public communication stems from the old struggle over the definition of truth, with various power-seeking participants. Building on Waisbord's ideas, we recognise the intricate nature of modern public communication amid the expanding digital landscape. Diverse technical affordances and epistemic frameworks shape how various identity communities engage with news and information. In the post-truth era, discussions around news and truth are aligned with what people do with information, rather than what journalists unilaterally decide they should know about reality (Waisbord, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that cultural and social identities shape what people accept as true, also within professional journalistic news content (Kreiss, 2019). Differing interpretations of reality now coexist, shaped by varying ideological perspectives (Hameleers, 2020). During crises, people with low trust in traditional news media tend to turn to alternative news sources to validate their worldviews, which can lead to increased use of misinformation (Frischlich et al., 2023). Media distrust is thus likely to be both a key reason for consuming alternative news and a potential outcome of such consumption (Andersen et al., 2021). We presume that besides the unilateral distinction between traditional and alternative news usage, multifaceted epistemological premises are used to search for, understand, and use knowledge and information.

This article examines the epistemological discourses in Finnish media users' perceptions, focusing on how they engage with news and other information sources and how they perceive other people doing so during the COVID-19 pandemic.

We argue that the diversity of media users' epistemological understandings poses a fundamental challenge for the communicative landscape of today's liberal democracies. By examining how media users determine the reliability and source of knowledge, and how they make use of it, we can trace shifts in evolving conceptions of knowledge and in journalism's epistemic authority. This study thus contributes to research on epistemic contestations in liberal democracies, such as Finland, by providing new insights into how media users assess the credibility of knowledge and into the purposes and strategies they employed when seeking information about the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the 'Theoretical Framework' section below, we first examine the high demand for information and its overabundance during the

COVID-19 outbreak. Next, we focus on the change in the epistemic status of knowledge, especially in the context of journalism. In the 'Data and Methods' section, we introduce our interview data collection based on discussions with Finnish media users and explain our process of data analysis. Finally, we present our findings and derive conclusions.

Theoretical framework

In the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak, people's news consumption increased as they attempted to make sense of the health crisis (Groot Kormelink and Klein Gunnewiek 2022, Mihelj et al. 2022; Vermeer et al. 2022). Government press conferences and television news were important sources of information and were generally considered more trustworthy than other sources (Casero-Ripollés, 2020, Mihelj et al., 2022, Lupton and Lewis, 2021, Cushion et al., 2022). Rather than sensational or entertaining news, the public preferred service-related news and news about how their own community was dealing with the spread of the virus (Masullo et al. 2022). Moreover, people actively sought diverse sources of information rather than being passive recipients of news (Casero-Ripollés, 2020; Lupton and Lewis, 2021).

The challenges to a shared sense of truth and widely recognised knowledge became rapidly apparent. Information on the new disease and the virus was widespread, allowing anyone with an internet connection to assume the role of an amateur epidemiologist commenting on the severity of the virus (Haider and Sundin, 2022). Battles over who held authority to speak on the issue were recurrent; besides politicians and health authorities, other power players, such as alternative health influencers, also instructed people, using their social media reach to disseminate alternative and dissenting information (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen, 2023). The controversial concept of COVID-19 infodemic (see, e.g., Farkas and Schou, 2024), which the WHO defined as an overabundance of information, illustrates how traditional institutions and official authorities have lost their monopoly over authoritative information. This was made possible by the hybrid media system, which enables voices that speak against established knowledge to be heard (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen, 2023). It is important to note that misinformation was a significant problem long before the COVID-19 pandemic, for example during the Spanish Flu pandemic a century earlier, when information was frequently misleading, inconsistent, and based on rumours, while scientific investigations conducted across Europe often proved un-

reliable (Eicher, 2025). Health issues thus exemplify the changing authority and interplay between the media, science, and politics, which is more prevalent in the hybrid media system (Mortensen and Nørgaard Kristensen, 2023).

The Finnish news landscape has been transforming over the past decade, shaping how people relate to the media. The Finnish media system belongs to the Nordic media welfare states (Syvertsen et al., 2014), which is a combination of the democratic corporatist media system (Hallin and Mancini, 2004) and a social-democratic welfare state model (Esping-Andersen, 1990). In recent years, Finland's inclusion within this conception has come under increasing criticism (e.g., Ala-Fossi, 2020; Grönlund et al., 2024) because the transition from the welfare state to the competition state in Finland has been more rapid and extensive than elsewhere in the Nordic region. Finland also abandoned direct press subsidies and the traditional dual Nordic subsidy model in the 1990s, unlike the other large Nordic countries: Denmark, Norway, and Sweden (Ala-Fossi, 2020).

The Finnish news environment has transformed regionally and locally. In the Nordic countries, local and regional newspapers have played a key role in helping to ensure public debate in smaller communities within dispersed populations (Hujanen et al., 2019). However, over the last 20 years, the number of traditional local media outlets has decreased by one-fifth (Ala-Fossi et al., 2020). Local and regional newspapers owned by the same company deliver each other's news content, making it less important to the local community (Hujanen et al., 2023). Meanwhile, interlopers and peripheral actors have emerged into the journalistic field, blurring the boundaries of the audiences' understanding of what journalism is and who can be called a journalist (e.g., Eldridge II, 2025; Loosen, 2015; Maares and Hanusch, 2023). Such actors, comprising communal and organisational news media lookalikes, news start-ups, hyperlocal initiatives, and social media groups, assume journalistic forms, styles, and methods but do not necessarily consider themselves to be journalists or follow journalism's ethical principles (Ruotsalainen et al., 2024).

It is crucial to recognise that trends in institutional trust are not uniform but depend on the specific institution, national context, and time period examined (Valgarðsson et al., 2025). At the height of the pandemic, Finland was rated as the country with the highest levels of overall trust (69%) and still holds the highest score among 48 markets, according to the 2025 Reuters Institute Digital News Report (Newman, 2025: 25; also, Jallinoja and Väliverronen, 2021). However, contradictory voices, especially among supporters of the

populist Finns Party, had actively questioned established media institutions even before COVID-19 (Malinen et al., 2022).

In the Finnish context, several factors contributed to the consistently high levels of trust during COVID-19. First, trust in science and expert institutions was already strong before the pandemic (Jallinoja et al., 2024). Average levels of trust have increased in recent years, although with substantial variation tied to individuals' political orientations (Saarinen et al., 2020). Second, polarised debates over topics such as COVID-19 restrictions may have strengthened the majority's trust in experts, institutions, and the news media in Finland (Reunanen, 2022). Finally, political disagreements over how to manage the restriction of the virus remained relatively moderate within Finland's multi-party system. Opposition parties largely refrained from criticising the government's actions, demonstrating willingness to undergo the ordeal together (Jallinoja et al., 2024, p. 491). This aligns with the Finnish tradition of consensus-seeking in politics (Saarinen et al., 2020), rooted in a historical experience that remains a cautionary example of deep societal divisions culminating in the 1918 Civil War (Koivunen, 2021).

The changing epistemic status of knowledge in the context of journalism

Traditionally, mainstream media has held an authoritative position in an epistemic system of providing information that the public finds legitimate and credible (Kreiss, 2019). *Epistemology* can be broadly understood as what members of the democratic public accept as true in political and social life; that is, the work of legitimising certain types of information as knowledge (Kreiss, 2019; Lewis and Westlund, 2015). In the hybrid media environment, in which various contesting knowledge producers proliferate (Chadwick, 2017), journalism's hold over epistemic authority has weakened and should be re-examined (Waisbord, 2018). Journalists have traditionally legitimised their accounts by relying on specific sources, such as official authorities or expert professionals. These actors have thus become "authorized knowers" through the news (Fishman, 1980, p. 145); the journalistic evidentiary strategy has offered them the power to define social reality (Carlson, 2020). This practice has alienated sizeable groups of people from this authoritative reality, leading them to gradually lose trust in news media. In certain groups, every piece of information is treated with scepticism, despite it coming from traditionally authoritative sources (van Dalen, 2020).

Since the early 2000s, research has highlighted the challenges that the growing need for a shared collective identity poses to modern

democracy (Bein, 2022). If citizens do not perceive themselves as part of a shared nation, the system cannot function effectively (Fukuyama, 2018). Collective identity is grounded in the “connective structure of a common knowledge and self-image, based on the attachment to common rules and values on the one hand, and on the memory of a jointly inhabited past on the other” (Bein, 2022 referring to Assmann, 2000, pp. 16–17). However, the implicitly normative ideas of democracy as constitutive of political community has also been criticised. Farkas and Schou (2024) argue that such specific understanding of what counts as true and false is apt to present certain forms of power as natural and inherent to democracy. Such truth claims elide the fact that democracy has never been identical to truth but continually evolving and disputed, expressing the voice of the people (Farkas and Schou, 2024).

According to Kreiss (2019, p. 230), partisan identity has become the new basis for moral evaluation in the civil sphere, shaping epistemology. In other words, if citizens derive their moral understandings from their partisan identities, these also determine how they evaluate knowledge claims in terms of legitimacy and credibility. Schwarzenegger (2020) addresses the phenomenon as *personal epistemology of the media*, referring to questions of how and on what grounds people develop an understanding of the media when they use these conceptions in their sensemaking of mediated information. Along these lines, Van Zoonen (2012) introduces the concept of *I-pistemology* – personal experiences and feelings, subjective judgement, and individual memory – as the source of conceived truth.

In today’s public communication, a widely shared sense of truth becomes just one option among innumerable personal and group convictions embedded in partisan, ideological, and religious epistemologies (Waisbord, 2018). Waisbord (2018, p. 1871) defines *truth* as “intersubjective agreement on conditions for the production of knowledge”, which cannot be achieved if publics do not share a common epistemology on how knowledge and facts are produced and applied (see also boyd, 2018; Parks, 2022). Parks (2022) approaches the question of various knowledge claims from the idea that there are many incommensurate – yet equally powerful – senses of truth, to which people are deeply committed when discussing subjects such as climate change or health care (see also boyd 2018). For example, ideological truths can be recognised when an argument comports with an individual’s pre-existing beliefs or reinforces values that align with their social identity. Affective truths are based on one’s instincts and emotions and often influence decisions that require evaluative judgement (Parks, 2022, pp. 184–185).

Discourse analysis

The concept of discourse provides a framework for distinguishing the diverse perspectives through which media users evaluate the reliability of knowledge in their processes of news consumption and sense-making. The article draws on two different schools of discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (e.g., Fairclough, 2013, 1992), and Discourse Theory (DT) (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). Following Fairclough (2013, p. 98), we understand discourse socio-theoretically as the use of language as social practice. This perspective emphasises how meaning is both brought into the complex relations that constitute social life and constructed within them (Fairclough, 2013, p. 3). Language simultaneously constitutes social identities, social relations, and systems of knowledge and shared belief – although the degree of salience varies across contexts (ibid, pp. 98–99). We explore discourses and how they “arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (ibid., p. 99). Fairclough refers to Gramsci’s (1971) fundamental concept of hegemony when linking discourse to power, arguing that discourses are shaped by prevailing hegemonic relations and conflicts. Hence, the core of CDA lies in the dialectical relationship between discourse and power, and how they influence other relationships within the social process (Fairclough, 2013, p. 20).

Following Laclau and Mouffe (2014), we place value on discursively constituted meaning-making processes, involving discursive struggles through which social groups negotiate and reproduce collective identities and subject positions in relation to others (Vaarala and Farkas, 2025, p. 5). Laclau and Mouffe (2014, p. 18) argue that the era of universal discourses ends alongside the decline of shared normative epistemologies. Similarly, we observe epistemic understanding becoming fragmented within liberal democracy, further shaped by digitalisation and platformisation, and contend that this transformation is reflected in various discourses.

We introduce the concept of *epistemological discourse*, which we engage with theoretically and operationalise in our analysis. Epistemological discourse refers to the socio-cultural rhetorics through which media users evaluate the reliability of knowledge production and dissemination, reflect on the power relations and economic dynamics that shape knowledge construction, and negotiate trust in its legitimacy. It provides a framework for diverse rhetorics through which media users evaluate journalists’ epistemic authority (c.f., Farkas, 2023) and the rational consensus underpinning liberal democracy (c.f., Farkas and Schou, 2024). The notion

of epistemological discourse is shaped by historical, temporal, and cultural contexts and unfolds within socially constructed settings. Examining epistemological discourses enables scholars to critically interrogate and dismantle shifting premises of epistemic understanding, while also challenging the rational foundations of liberal democracy. In operationalising the concept, we draw on Farkas's (2023) observations on the advantages of CDA and DT for studying journalism. We explain these in detail in the 'Data and Methods' section. Epistemological discourses enable us to interpret journalism's shifting epistemic authority as part of broader societal transformations marked by a declining legitimacy of democratic institutions and an ongoing need for renewal (Calhoun, 2022).

Based on the outlined theoretical starting points, this article addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Which epistemological discourses can be identified in Finnish media users' reflections on COVID-19 news and information?

RQ2: How do the premises of reliable knowledge manifest in these discourses?

Data and methods

The data analysed for this study consists of 14 qualitative semi-structured interviews with Finnish media users who perceived the reliability of COVID news and information provided by professional journalism and news media, city, community, and health authorities as well local social media groups differently. The research was conducted as a case study within a specific geographical region, where the audience had access to similar media and information on COVID-19. Most of our interviewees came from the Oulu region, the largest urban centre in northern Finland with 250,000 inhabitants. It has a rich local media ecosystem comprising traditional news outlets and new publications that have been reshaping the local media landscape (Grönlund et al., 2022). We try to capture how media users navigate these transformations in the epistemic landscape of knowledge.

Several newcomers have recently appeared in the local media ecosystem in Oulu. Oulu is exceptional in having enriched the selection of news for the region's inhabitants. Publications such as *OYS Plus* (online media outlet for Oulu University Hospital) and *Mun Oulu* (online media outlet for the city of Oulu) are examples of strategic communication, whereas *MustRead Oulu* is a startup news outlet. According to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report

(2017), Finland has relatively few startup news outlets due to the strong position of the traditional news media. At the time of data collection, Oulu residents also had several local information-sharing and discussion Facebook groups, a few of which were dedicated to critical views regarding COVID-19. The major traditional media outlets in the region include *Kaleva* (locally-oriented news media with printed newspaper and online version) and *YLE Oulu* (the local newsroom of Finland's national broadcaster), which represent professional journalism. We presumed that this rich media ecosystem would provide us with a variety of approaches in obtaining and using knowledge.

In our selection criteria, we approached individuals with varied understandings of reliable information, especially regarding COVID-19 news coverage, because we wanted to discover the information sources that individuals used to find knowledge and the various purposes they used it for. This was also the premise for a qualitative research design. We tried to offer an explanatory compilation of various ways to acquire, use, and make sense of knowledge, especially in the local context.

The relatively small sample size inevitably introduces limitations, as it prevents us drawing conclusions based on participants' age, gender, or social background. Therefore, we emphasise the exploratory nature of the study. Since our primary aim was to capture the nuanced ways in which people acquire knowledge differently and in relation to various factors (c.f. Boyd, 2018; Parks, 2022), we consider a small sample drawn from a specific local media and information ecosystem sufficient to describe these differences qualitatively. This applies particularly to how individuals obtain, evaluate, and use crisis-related knowledge as part of their processes of collective identity building.

Interviewees were sought out and recruited using the snowball sampling method; emails were sent to numerous individuals working in academia, media organisations, news outlets, and local community centres, asking them to spread the word that voluntary interviewees were needed. Moreover, direct messages were sent to members of Oulu-based groups on Facebook, including those who were sceptical about official information on COVID-19. Subsequently, further participants were enlisted by asking interviewees to recommend people with diverging attitudes towards mainstream media who might be interested in participating in the study. Despite the sensitive nature of our research topic and difficulties in gaining the trust of strangers, we managed to gather a diverse group of interviewees.

Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face and four interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams between May and

August 2022. The sample consisted of eight women, five men, and one person who chose not to be identified by gender. The youngest participant was 29 and the oldest 74. The interviews were held in, e.g., a meeting room at the local library, the interviewee's home or office, or the interviewer's hotel room. The interviewing conditions in each case were quiet, peaceful, and confidential. The interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes. The interviews consisted of three themes: (1) use of media; (2) developing trust and emotions; and (3) belonging to the local community. The interviewees were asked about their daily news consumption routines and information-gathering practices during the COVID-19 outbreak, their evaluation of official information and restrictions, and their trust in various national and local news media, as well as new local information providers. The questions also covered the interviewees' activity on social media regarding the pandemic. At the time of the interviews, the tightest COVID-19 restrictions had been loosened, but the interviewees remembered how it felt to lead their everyday lives under exceptional circumstances.

We follow Farkas's (2023) application of discourse analysis within the field of journalism. Accordingly, we study epistemic understanding through central questions of power, antagonism, and exclusion, such as: Who has the authority to define what is trustworthy knowledge? Which voices and agendas are considered more relevant than others? Who is "us," and who the "other," based on what they regard as fact? (see Farkas, 2023, p. 245). We analysed the interview data qualitatively to identify the epistemological discourses that people used to make sense of news and other information on COVID-19.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by the corresponding author, and analysed through three rounds of coding using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. In the first round, we read through the entire dataset to gain an overall understanding of the responses. In the second round, we identified distinctive themes emerging from participants' reflections on their relationship with knowledge and information regarding COVID-19. We were particularly interested in the participants' relationships with journalistic knowledge, their attitudes towards scientific knowledge and experts, how they assessed sources of information, and whether they emphasised knowledge that matched their worldview and values. In the third round, we focused on participants' responses to the open-ended question: "*How do you find reliable knowledge?*", analysing how these answers aligned with the themes identified in the second round. Overall, we aimed to construct a comprehensive understanding of how and why participants used information regarding COVID-19. We thus identified epistemological discourses

within the themes by examining how interviewees represented, interpreted, and made sense of knowledge and information about COVID-19.

Findings: Epistemological discourses in crisis communication

We first focus on two micro-level epistemological discourses in our participants' perceptions: "*Journalistic knowledge is sufficiently reliable*" and "*Journalistic knowledge is just one side of the story.*" Through these discourses, we analyse how participants individually perceived information and news on the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of journalism, and what expectations they held regarding trustworthy information and reliable knowledge. Second, we introduce meso-level discourse, "*Reliable knowledge exists beyond journalism*", through which participants reflected on other epistemological discourses they encountered in their social and local communities. We derived the names of the discourses from the core arguments articulated in participants' perceptions. Finally, building on these discourses, we identify the epistemological premises through which participants evaluated the reliability of the COVID-19 information and news they encountered.

"Journalistic knowledge is sufficiently reliable"

Within the discourse of journalistic knowledge being sufficiently reliable, *journalistic information relating to COVID-19 is highly valued and represented as trustworthy*. Journalistic knowledge is perceived as information provided by epistemic authorities, such as experts and professionals, and delivered via mainstream media and press conferences.

This discourse thus constructs and sustains a collective identity grounded in shared trust in society, institutions, and rationality, positioning "us" as the majority aligned with the epistemic mainstream. By mainstream media, participants referred mainly to the national broadcasting company *YLE*, especially its local newsroom *YLE Oulu*, and the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, but regional and local news media were also included. The national media supplied information about the national situation as a whole, but for practical advice participants found that local authorities, such as Oulu University Hospital's online media outlet *OYS Plus* and Oulu city's official website, offered more accurate information.

Within this discourse, journalistic knowledge is utilised because it is perceived as informative, offering practical advice when up-to-date information is urgently needed. The reliability of journalistic

knowledge is taken almost for granted, as the quotation below illustrates:

Well, I trust in these traditional media, *YLE* and the *Helsingin Sanomat*, so I haven't felt the need to search for information elsewhere because I've been actively following those. [...] I happily accept what these easily accessible media outlets offer...

(Interviewee 7 (I7))

During the pandemic, news coverage in Finland's mainstream media was based mainly on reports from various actors in health and social affairs (Valentini et al., 2023). Their perspectives, however, were not equally represented in the news articles: the most prominent political actors, COVID-19 researchers, and healthcare professionals received more visibility than smaller or less powerful actors (Valentini et al., 2023, p. 18). Within the discourse of journalistic knowledge as sufficiently reliable, no weight is given to the uneven coverage of the authorities' crisis communication. Instead, the main premise is that mainstream news is trustworthy, therefore the information it provides is credible and reliable: "the information came in real time from the impressive female ministers, who were standing in a row giving the impression of straight communication" (I6). The mainstream media's one-sided use of experts, i.e., the fact that the same people were repeatedly interviewed in the news and television studios, is represented as acceptable. Instead of questioning whether this circulation of professionals limits the range of perspectives, it is typical within this discourse to stand up for such experts and ponder "how stressful" the constant commenting must be for them personally, since they are "placing themselves as a target for hate messages day after day" (I4).

Within this discourse, there is still strong confidence in Finland as a media welfare state (c.f., Syvertsen et al. 2014) and a long history of knowledge institutions. The following quotation underlines the position of knowledge institutions as epistemic authorities, strengthened by the century-long tradition of professional journalism quickly and systematically acquiring reliable up-to-date information provided by experts (Kunelius, 2000). Accordingly, it points out the good intentions of official authorities and experts constructed within this discourse:

In Finland, the heritage of Swedish rule is that we have powerful institutions of authority and state bureaus, and I do not perceive them as adversaries, as something that must be contested; on the contrary, they are actually the foundational pillars of the welfare society. And when you are an expert in a specific field, you do not believe yourself to be an expert in every field, for

example, virology, so that I would start arguing with those who have studied and defended their doctoral thesis and studied this topic for decades – why would I not believe them?

(15)

Here, the exceptional nature of the pandemic is visible in participants' evaluations of journalists' and authorities' success in crisis communication. The unwavering reliability of information is not at the top of their agenda, because the professionals are recognised as being in an unexpectedly difficult situation. Journalistic knowledge on COVID-19 is assessed as "reliable enough" considering that there was initially little knowledge to be delivered, and afterwards information changed rapidly. Many respondents showed compassion towards journalists and authorities, who had "surely done their best" (17) when covering "not the easiest topic" (14), and were largely accepting "a bit of contradictory and fluctuating information" (16). The discourse is characterised by a belief that journalistic knowledge was based on the best current information available, which also made it the most reliable.

"Journalistic knowledge is just one side of the story"

Within the discourse of journalistic knowledge being just one side of the story, *journalistic knowledge is regarded with scepticism*. Information based on the traditional epistemic authorities' reports is perceived as one-sided, presenting facts as indisputable and excluding scientific counterarguments. This discourse constructs a collective identity centred on general scepticism and positions "us" as epistemically contradictory. In the context of COVID-19 reporting, this orientation was directed towards authorities, experts, and journalists, but it also extended to other issues that quickly become politicised. Journalists are represented as uncritical, repeating the views of decision makers and whatever is perceived as official knowledge. Critics thus judge the mainstream media for not fulfilling its role as a watchdog, i.e., holding political actors accountable in democratic society (see Norris, 2014). This discourse challenges journalistic information by putting facts into perspective with corresponding knowledge delivered in other countries or other scientific fields. For example, coverage of the death tolls of COVID-19 was perceived as misleading because the figures allegedly omitted other causes that might have led to the increase in deaths.

Within this discourse, alternative voices and critical perspectives are allegedly excluded from public debate and presented as mis- and disinformation or fake news, with no further enquiry. Mainstream media coverage, which mainly delivers expert knowledge

and information of official authorities, is often represented as top-down and biased in its practices and style. For example, I3 longed for a neutral and dialogical style in news reports, which would have delivered a more nuanced picture of the situation:

To me, it seems they [the authorities and journalists] have made a big mistake in not taking people's questions and worries seriously and instead regarding them as nonsense... or as some conspiracy theory. By playing down those people without looking into their questions more deeply, like: "Hmm... how could we actually answer this?". The authorities surely tried their best, [it was] a difficult situation, but... they could have dealt with it better.

(I3)

This discourse alleges that journalistic knowledge became politicised and was constructed by hegemonic power relations during the outbreak, because critical perspectives were not given visibility in news coverage. It also notes that being a critic became more difficult as one could be easily belittled and discredited, with those holding critical views being labelled "conspiracy theorists", "tin hats", or "Putinists" (I2). For example, I2 argued that because mainstream media allegedly suppressed alternative information and critical perspectives, many people fell silent due to fear of damaging their reputations or losing their jobs.

In evaluating the credibility of knowledge, this discourse privileges the knowledge itself, rather than the source of information. Unlike the discourse of journalistic knowledge being sufficiently reliable, within this discourse, journalists are called upon to also listen to scientists and experts who represent alternative approaches to the official line. That is considered fundamental, because "science is based on discussion and debate" (I3) and "in one sense, science is anarchistic and does not respect authorities too much" (I2). Thus, within this discourse, the understanding of trustworthy information encompasses the dialogical nature of knowledge, suggesting that the best available knowledge at any given time emerges from a diversity of in-depth arguments rather than representing an ultimate truth. For this reason, alternative knowledge is also seen as one-sided and biased.

"Reliable knowledge exists beyond journalism"

In participants' perceptions, this discourse emerged at the meso-level, reflecting their observations of other discourses circulating within their social and local communities, which they either actively participated in or knew through acquaintances and family mem-

bers. For this reason, the discourse also constructed a collective identity at meso-level, portraying a distinctive “them” and aligning epistemically with positions perceived as strange or obscure. The significance of this discourse thus lies in its ability to demonstrate how individuals construct their identities through language by distancing themselves from unfamiliar values and underlying assumptions. Hence, the empirical strength derives from participants’ reflections on their own epistemic understanding as revealed through their observations of other people’s discourses.

Within this discourse, the scientific and expert base does not bring much value to knowledge. Instead, *the reliability of knowledge is evaluated primarily based on its ideological substance*, i.e., how well it aligns with one’s partisan identity (see Kreiss, 2019). Pressure from close family members or friends also influences people’s sense-making of information. This is in line with a recent study (Horowitz et al., 2023) which reveals that in the Nordic countries, friends, acquaintances, and family are the most trusted sources overall, with over 90% of survey respondents indicating that they trusted them as sources. This meso-level discourse proved remarkable, as nearly every participant recognised it when describing a relative, colleague or friend who “had adopted an attitude that was no longer justified with scientific knowledge” (I6). This turnaround by “educated people” aroused interest and amazement in the participants and prompted them to take a look at the alternative information sources to “get some idea of what’s going on there” (I13):

I willingly watch all those weird “channels of the light” [a way to describe information sources experienced as dubious] and so on to get a picture of what people believe in on the woo-woo side. But personally, mostly it’s astonishment and... a kind of disappointment... You begin to wonder what it is that they really think – how it’s possible that people in Finland, educated people, start believing in such idiocy.

(I13)

Within this discourse, other people turning to alternative information is seen as a ramification of the inadequacy of mainstream news coverage. Participants listed clear reasons why people might start to look for alternative information, yet they regarded the alternative information itself as dangerous. Criticism of traditional news outlets, however, is acceptable, because “some issues have been downplayed and handled rather one-sidedly, which has perhaps led certain people to oppose... and to question whether also this issue [COVID-19] is entirely true, and then they start doing their own research and maybe find other like-minded people and blunder on...” (I4).

Participants perceived this discourse as linking declining trust in journalistic reporting on COVID-19 to its allegedly biased nature, its limited perspectives, and insufficient contextualisation of data in mainstream media. They also emphasised its social dimension, noting that individuals may gain confidence in their own research when interacting with others who have likewise begun questioning the official knowledge disseminated by journalists. All these issues were regarded as reasons for some individuals to start looking for alternative information. Social media and internet-based sources, in particular, were used to find alternative COVID-19 information to supplement the insufficiencies of mainstream media (Sirola et al., 2022).

The premises of reliable knowledge in epistemological discourses

To address RQ2, the main epistemological premises of reliability within the data gathered are based on *the origins of knowledge*, *the source of knowledge*, and *the usage of knowledge*. These premises seem to correspond to three components of journalistic epistemology: the production of knowledge, the form of knowledge, and the public acceptance of knowledge claims (Ekström, 2002). In this study, these components are defined on different premises from those of epistemology of journalism in terms of journalists' use of sources, building news texts, and other newsroom practices (Carlson, 2020), as can be perceived in what follows.

Within the first two discourses, reliable knowledge, in the news and media context, is based on official authorities, scientific research, and expert knowledge. There is, however, remarkable divergence in how the concept of scientific research is perceived within these discourses. The discourse of *journalistic knowledge as sufficiently reliable* distinguishes between expert knowledge and gut feelings and emotions, "the truth emerging from marketplaces" (H5). This discourse thus finds official information regarding COVID-19 mostly trustworthy. Its confidence in journalistic knowledge might be due to ignorance of the argumentative and self-corrective nature of research and the belief that journalists have the expertise to assess the reliability of their sources. Scientific knowledge itself is not questioned.

In turn, within the discourse of *journalistic knowledge being just one side of the story*, scientific knowledge alone does not provide sufficient premises for reliable information. It is appropriate to expect scientific knowledge to be based on in-depth argumentation, robust evidence from recognised researchers, presentation of comprehensive perspectives, and transparency regarding financial and political affiliations of the research. Accordingly, journalistic in-

formation and coverage by the mainstream media are seen to lack diverse and comprehensive argumentation, making them unreliable and one-sided. Mainstream media, within this critique, were considered to combine national, regional, and local media outlets. Diverse argumentation within the news, as well as transparency in delivering the best information currently available – which is not the final truth – would lend greater credibility to mainstream media as a whole.

There are also differences between the discourses in *what is perceived as a reliable source*. Within the discourse that values journalistic knowledge highly, quality media, such as the traditional media outlets *Kaleva* and *YLE Oulu*, are considered reliable because they employ skilled journalists who are competent in using sources (particularly scientific sources), as well as in interviewing recognised experts and combining information from various contexts. Within the other discourses, news coverage is perceived as journalists' interpretation of expert knowledge, which can impact the overall representation of the situation through, e.g., perspective and strong wording choices. These discourses regard the digitalisation and platformisation of communication as ground-breaking technical affordances, since they provide the public with straightforward access to the origins of knowledge.

In terms of the use of knowledge, *reliability comes from the experience of how well information is assessed to fit its purpose*. This was so whether information was used for informative, ideological, or individual purposes. For example, the discourse in which reliable knowledge is connected to sources “beyond journalism” gives weight to social cohesion with like-minded people and thus trusts knowledge that fits their ideology.

Conclusions

In this study, we have examined the epistemological premises that Finnish media users employed to evaluate the legitimacy of knowledge in the context of journalism, as well as why they acquired information regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research design allowed us to identify epistemological discourses, i.e., how media users assessed which knowledge was reliable and the various ways in which they used and made sense of it during the pandemic. From our interview data, we identified two micro-level discourses alongside one meso-level discourse. Within the first micro-level discourse, *“Journalistic knowledge is sufficiently reliable”*, information produced by public officials, epidemiologists, and other epistemic authorities and delivered by journalists is valued

highly. Within the second, *“Journalistic knowledge is just one side of the story”*, news and information delivered by journalists and based on the epistemic authorities’ views is one-sided. As part of this discourse, the interviewees did not challenge scientific knowledge as such but criticised journalists for being uncritical towards decision-makers and excluding opposing scientific arguments from the news. Within the meso-level discourse, *“Reliable knowledge can be found beyond journalism”*, the reliability of knowledge is evaluated based on its ideological substance: how well it aligns with one’s partisan identity and the opinions of close friends and family members. In this discourse, alternative information is seen as a replacement for mainstream news coverage, which is deemed insufficient.

These discourses reveal that, in the context of crisis communication, media users shape their engagement with journalistic knowledge according to their varying levels of trust in mainstream media. Recent studies show that if trust is low, people readily turn to alternative information sources (e.g., Andersen et al., 2021; Dahlgren, 2018). However, according to our study, the discourses were not unequivocally constructed between those media users who found COVID-19 news coverage reliable and those who were sceptical of the official information on the pandemic. Rather, those who generally trusted journalistic knowledge also preferred news without explicit interpretation by journalists. Those who were mainly sceptical towards mainstream news media still used it and found some of the reporting somewhat credible. Moreover, epistemological discourses indicate that media users take advantage of new technical affordances, using various sources to seek information that fits their ideological and epistemological frames. We thus argue that in such epistemic contestations, journalistic knowledge becomes only one aspect among a range of others and journalism’s hold over epistemic authority begins to weaken (c.f. Waisbord, 2018).

Through these epistemological discourses, we can observe how different articulations and discourses compete for the hegemony of epistemic authority. These struggles over knowledge are shaped both by the ideological advocacies on which they draw and by the collective identities constructed within epistemological discourses. The discourses show how collective identities are constructed through language, as individuals reshape an “us” around common values, beliefs, and experiences. At the same time, they intersect with broader democratic contests over institutional power, illustrating that the traditional epistemic order, grounded in the expertise of knowledge institutions and in the core concepts of objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality, that underpin the ideology

of Western journalism (Robertson, 2025), is not fixed but continually evolving alongside wider societal transformations.

Our findings support previous research (e.g., Valaskivi and Robertson, 2022; van Dalen, 2020), suggesting that during an epistemic transformation of knowledge, people's common understanding of what constitutes reliable information becomes fragmented. Moreover, especially in the era of social media, many people encounter, or intentionally seek out, news online without necessarily knowing whether it originates from newspapers, television, online-only news outlets, friends and family on social media, or from cloaked individuals or bots operating as agents of organized disinformation campaigns (Schudson, 2022). Since the use of knowledge has become more diverse, media users today have a broader understanding of epistemic premises of trustworthy knowledge.

Our study also highlights several issues within the journalistic field that could reduce trust in mainstream media, which were seen in the news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic: uncritical dissemination of official information, impartial representation using a limited pool of experts, and neglecting to address public concerns. These concerns should be taken seriously, since they are part of the broader issue of people criticising online news as poor journalism and political propaganda (see Nielsen and Graves, 2017).

Finally, as with any study, this analysis has its limitations besides the small sample size already noted above. The information on respondents' media use was self-reported, and we did not design the study for triangulation. For further studies, it would be useful to supplement interviews with a complementary information source, such as a diary method or data donation, to determine how people actually used media.

Moreover, it is necessary to highlight that the COVID-19 pandemic was a distinctive, highly complex polycrisis that required official public health information and news updates to inform citizens. Specific trajectories were involved, such as early outbreaks, new variants, surveillance, testing and tracing, and vaccine development and distribution or promotion (Ytre-Arne and Moe, 2021). These different phases may also have affected how people perceived news and information at any given time, depending on urgency, extent of infection, hospitalisations, and deaths (c.f., Ytre-Arne, 2023).

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