

From Consuming Printed News to Making Online Journalism?

Young Finns' Newspaper Reading at the Millennium

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Newspapers represent a significant area of media, where the Internet and the emergence of new media challenge existing practices of making and using journalism. Finding ways to improve the relationship between newspapers and their readers by means of the Internet has turned out to be an important task for the Finnish print media as they are facing the problem of losing contact with young people. Journalism research has been influenced by interactive Internet communication and ideas about public journalism. One of the key challenges has been formulated around how the roles of author and reader are being renegotiated: whether newspapers try to position their readers as active participants in journalism instead of as passive recipients of the news and whether readers take part in making the news (cf. Heinonen 1999; Heikkilä & Kunelius 1997, Heikkilä 2001; Hujanen 2000).

Claims about changing media production and consumption practices often concentrate on the challenges and opportunities created by the development of communication technologies. However, changes in practices reflect not only technological developments, but also socio-cultural ones. So, whether or not the interactive features of Internet communication can be made use of in newspaper journalism, the readers play a pivotal role. This, in turn, leads to important questions about possible changes in practices of using online newspapers, i.e. whether people read online papers and whether the readers not only passively receive news to consume but also participate in the making of journal-

ism – and this is what I am interested in. I will examine possible shifts and changes brought by the Internet in uses of newspaper journalism, analysing how and to what extent old ‘passive’ newspaper journalism use patterns exist side by side with their ‘new’ more active counterparts.

To capture the pivotal aspects and elements of changing newspaper reading practices, studying young people may help to produce useful insights. The roles newspapers play in the everyday life of young people and the ways they use printed and online papers can also act as predictors of changes to come in the future. However, changes should not be taken for granted but critically explored: the idea of ‘a new media generation’ – children and young people interested in new technologies, enthusiastic to try out everything new – may turn out to be a myth and a strategy from those trying to create new media markets and audiences rather than an insightful analysis of the media world of young people (cf. von Feilitzen 1999, 19; Drotner 2000).

In order to investigate changing newspaper using practices, I will analyse quantitative data from a large survey. The young Finnish people who participated in the study represent a random sample of the population born in the years 1980, 1982, 1984 and 1986 in seven municipalities in Central Finland. At the time of the study, November-December 1999, the respondents were 13, 15, 17 and 19 years of age.

I will begin by presenting the printed and online newspapers that Finnish young people read and how often. Secondly, I will analyse both what sections young people prefer reading as well as how and to what extent they have participated in the making of newspapers. Thirdly, to outline the potential of regional and local newspapers for becoming

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ing more interactive forums through their online and printed versions, I go on discussing what Finnish young people expect from online newspapers and what they think about news about their own community. I will conclude with a discussion of how online newspapers are changing the ways young people use newspaper journalism.

Young People in the World of Printed Newspaper Journalism

In previous research on media use, daily papers have proved to be an integral part of young Finns' everyday life (Saanihahti 1999; Nuorison media-käyttötutkimus 1999). Compared to their counterparts in other countries, young Finns have proved to be among those who are most likely to read newspapers regularly (cf. Johnsson-Smaragdi & Jönsson 2001). However, alongside Internet communication and new media, the role of printed newspapers is assumed to be changing. The growing fear of Finnish journalists is that printed newspapers may no longer succeed in reaching young people. The new technology generation is often thought to be interested in new media, e.g. computers, the Internet, and online newspapers instead.

Only small changes in Finnish young people's newspaper-reading practices can be seen in the light of the present survey. Printed newspapers (still) proved to be an integral part of their everyday media world. Almost everybody (96%) reported that they read newspapers, a half of them daily. The frequency of reading and time spent increased with age. While nine out of ten in the younger (13–15 years old) group read a daily paper, nearly everyone in the older (17–19 years old) group did so. Unlike printed newspapers, online newspapers did not have such an important role in the everyday media use of Finnish young people: a fifth (19%) of the respondents claimed at the millennium that they read online newspapers.

The reading of online newspapers proved to be more unusual than expected. Firstly, almost every young person who answered the questionnaire made use of a computer; three quarters of the respondents had a computer at home and nearly a third had one in their own room. Moreover, nearly all the respondents were familiar with the Internet. An increasing number of the youngsters had an Internet connection even in their home computer (almost half of the respondents), and thus had easy access to online newspapers. Thus, surfing the Internet does not necessarily mean that young peo-

ple are also interested in reading news(papers) online.

Not only did young people read printed newspapers more often than the online ones, but they were also more attracted to them. Eight out of ten of those who reported reading online newspapers told that they prefer reading printed ones. Only two youngsters would rather read newspapers online. However, the young people studied were not a homogeneous group: both age and sex were reflected in the use of online newspapers. The older respondents were more likely to read newspapers on the Internet: in the age group of 13–15, less than a fifth (16%) reported reading online newspapers, whereas among youngsters aged 17–19, more than a fifth (22%) did so. On the one hand, the boys preferred reading online newspapers more often than the girls; the older boys were most likely to read online newspapers (26%). On the other hand, the boys had almost every kind of media equipment more frequently in their personal possession or use; the clearest difference could be seen in the availability of computers and Internet connections.

The introduction to media at school may not explain why many of the youngsters studied were not familiar with online newspapers. Despite the fact that Finnish schools offer a comprehensive introduction into the media – almost all respondents had, at least occasionally, attended mother tongue instruction, history, and civic lessons in which newspapers, television, the Internet, films or magazines were discussed – online newspapers had been seldom discussed. Online newspapers had been dealt with less frequently than other media, since only about a third of the respondents remembered becoming familiar with them at school. Despite the fact that one third of the youngsters reported that media had been dealt with in information technology instruction, only one out of ten reported that online newspapers had often been discussed at school.

Online Afternoon Papers, Gallups and Polls Attract Most

Of the various online newspapers, Finnish young people most often read afternoon papers. A third of those who reported reading online newspapers read *Italehti Online* (38%) or *Ilta-Sanomat* (33%) at least once a week. *Keskisuomalainen*, a regional newspaper published in Central Finland, was the second most popular online newspaper among the young people studied. Of those who read online

newspapers, 14% reported reading it. Almost half of those (47%) who read online newspapers reported they had never read *Keskisuomalainen* online. So, compared to the printed *Keskisuomalainen*, the online paper played a minor role in the media use of the young people studied.

The argument that the Internet has led to location no longer having a central role in the use of media is often heard. This kind of interpretation is not, however, supported by this study. Only one in ten (11) of those who read online newspapers reported weekly reading online *Helsingin Sanomat*, the biggest printed daily newspaper in Finland with a circulation of 457000 (in 1999). Almost as many, (10), reported reading online *Koillis-Häme*, a rather small local newspaper published in Jämsä, Central Finland (with a circulation of 7193 in 1999).

Changing ways of newspaper reading can be analysed through the sections young people are attracted to. In printed newspapers, the young people studied were mainly interested in sports and pages for young people: the boys preferred sport sections and the girls, pages for young people. Local and domestic news as well as letters to the editor also attracted their attention, whereas fairly few reported reading the economy and culture sections.

Online newspapers attracted young people through their gallups, questionnaires and polls. More than a third (37%) of the online newspaper readers visited them often. Girls proved to be more eager to follow gallups, questionnaires and polls. Of the girls who read online newspapers, only three had not read them, whereas of the boys a fifth had not. Age played only a minor role here. The second most popular section of the online newspapers turned out to be sports. More than a half (58%) of the online newspaper readers reported reading sports news sometimes or often.

The role of online newspapers as a source of (local) information could be seen in the rather common use of archives and information on local events. A third (28%) of the youngsters read online archives sometimes or often. Almost half of them (48%) reported sometimes or often reading sections about 'where to go or what to do'. Their interest in following links also indicates that it is not only journalism which attracts attention in online newspapers – or in printed papers. Links lead almost half of the young readers (46%) outside the online newspaper itself.

It is worth asking how interesting and important young people find staff information, local news, and letters to the editor. If a dialogue among read-

ers and between readers and journalists is set as an aim, they all – letters to the editor as expressions of opinion and local news as its fuel – can be seen as vital, despite the fact that many of those criticizing media performance as a carrier of public discussion seldom give attention to e.g. letters to the editor (cf. Pietilä 2001, 4). In this context, it must be stressed that local news was not the most attractive journalistic content in online newspapers for Finnish young people. A third (38%) of the online newspaper readers reported reading local news often or sometimes. It is also important to note that the letters to the editor section attracted young readers in printed newspapers more often than in online ones. Out of the youngsters who read online newspapers, a third (35%) reported reading online letters to the editor often or sometimes, whereas more than a half followed them regularly in a printed newspaper.

The girls in the 13-15 age group were most interested in online letters to the editor: two out of three read online letters to the editor often or sometimes, whereas only a third of the older girls, a quarter of the older boys and a fifth of younger boys did. The results also indicate that the place of residence affects the potential for a more active role for readers in newspaper journalism. Young people outside the Jyväskylä region were more interested in following the themes that were discussed in the letters to the editor section. Of those who lived outside the Jyväskylä region, a third reported often reading online letters to the editor sections, whereas one in ten of those who lived in the Jyväskylä region did so.

Many Finnish online newspapers offer staff information, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and journalists' areas of interest on the Internet. The majority of the young online newspaper readers (91%) reported not reading staff information.

Gallups, Questionnaires, and Own Texts – Participating in the Making of Newspapers

New media are assumed to change the practices of using news media and media texts if people are offered ways to contact media makers on the Internet, i.e. a chance to grow from passive receivers of media texts into active producers of journalism. A fifth of all respondents (123 respondents) reported having contacted media (see Hujanen & Pietikäinen 2001). Of them, 90 had contacted one or several newspapers. Almost a half (44) out of the youngsters who had contacted newspapers had met or communicated with newspaper journalists or

themselves written to a paper. They were 6% of all respondents. The girls seemed to be more active in making contact with journalists or themselves writing an article: 35 of the 44 youngsters were girls. The differences between the age groups remained slight: 28 were 17–19 years old and 16 were 13–15 years old. The 17–19-year-old girls were most eager to come into contact with newspaper journalists.

The results indicate that a printed newspaper represents not only the most familiar type of a newspaper but also the one which is the easiest and the most desirable to contact for young people. Only six respondents reported contacting online newspaper journalists or writing to an online newspaper themselves. They form not more than 1% of the respondents.

Young people were most likely to come into contact with regional and local newspapers. When contacting a journalist working for a printed newspaper or sending a text, young people most often contacted *Keskisuomalainen*, the regional daily published in Central Finland (32 out of 44 respondents). Ten youngsters named a local newspaper: *Koillis-Häme*, *Korpilahti*, *Petäjavesi*, *Hämäläinen* or *Vekkari*, whereas only two brought up *Helsingin Sanomat*. Out of the online newspapers the youngsters reported contacting both regional and local newspapers as well as afternoon papers. One respondent also referred to the online newspaper made at school.

To study how the passive practices of using newspapers are possibly changing into more active ones through new media, the respondents were asked in what ways they had participated in the making of printed and online newspapers: by giving feedback to the journalists, by sending them hints about potential stories or questions for stories, by answering questionnaires or polls, by being interviewed, by writing letters to the editor or stories for the paper.

The most popular way to contact a newspaper or any media was by answering questionnaires or taking part in polls or competitions. Half (48) of the 90 youngsters who had contacted a printed newspaper had answered their questionnaires or polls. Interestingly, not so many (29) reported taking part in online gallups and polls. Age seemed to enhance attraction towards printed papers' polls, gallups, and questionnaires: of those who had answered them, the majority (33) were 17–19 years. The number of girls who had taken part (37) exceeded the number of boys (11). The most eager partici-

pants proved to be older girls: 25 out of 38 reported answering questionnaires.

Sending their own texts to printed papers proved to be as popular: 44 had written letters to the editor or stories for the youth pages. Because 20 youngsters also reported having written journalistic texts to be published in a newspaper, at least 64 respondents had contributed to the printed regional or local newspaper with their own texts. Writing to online discussion groups proved not to be as popular: 18 youngsters had written to online discussion groups. Of all respondents, these youngsters formed a rather small minority (3%). A majority of those who reported sending their own stories to be published were girls, whereas the number of boys was rather low. Both in the younger and older age groups, half of the girls who had contacted a printed newspaper, had also written texts themselves. By contrast, only six of the older boys had sent their own stories for the letters to the editor or youth pages; only one of the younger boys reported doing this.

Among the ways of taking part in producing newspaper texts, giving feedback to journalists, sending them hints about potential stories or questions for stories proved to be rather uncommon: 16 respondents (2%) had made comments to journalists on their printed news. Giving journalists in printed papers hints about potential news stories or asking for stories were even more exceptional. Only 9 respondents reported doing this; all but one of them were girls. As regards taking part in producing online newspaper journalism, young people were even less active; a few (9) youngsters reported giving journalists feedback about their online stories or sending them questions for making news. Nor had many given online newspaper journalists hints for writing news (5).

To sum up, printed newspapers were more successful in attracting young readers' attention than the online ones. The Internet has brought little change to their participation in the making of newspapers. Instead of becoming makers of journalistic texts through their own input, young Finns seemed to stick to the familiar role of the news reader: at the millennium they were news consumers, i.e. receivers of news rather than writers of journalism.

However, it must be said that more than one out of ten of all youngsters had contacted a newspaper and newspapers were the most popular of the media to contact. Thus, from the point of view of young readers, newspapers do possess the potential of having (also) an audience of citizens who strive

for an active role in journalism, including journalistic practices. However, young readers' chances of achieving a larger role in the making of journalism are also in journalists' hands. Of the 90 youngsters who had contacted a printed newspaper, no more than 26 (4%) had been interviewed by journalists. Because of this, young people actually proved to have been the more active party in the relationship between journalists and their readers.

New communication technologies encourage active readership: when the respondents were asked how they had contacted printed and online newspapers – by sending them a letter or a card, through the Internet or E-mail, by sending them a short message, by faxing or calling them, by visiting them at their offices – the Internet and E-mail proved to have offered useful new ways to contact newspapers. A third of the respondents reported sending them E-mail. Especially among the boys, the Internet and E-mail turned out to be a popular way of contacting newspapers; almost a half (11) of the boys who reported contacting newspapers made the contact through the Internet or E-mail, whereas a third of the girls reported making contact this way.

Sending letters and postcards also proved to be important ways of contacting newspapers: a third of those who had contacted one or several newspapers had sent them a letter or a card. Posting a letter or a card proved to be the girls' way to contact newspapers: almost a half (30) of the girls who had contacted newspapers had sent them 'traditional' post, whereas only two boys reported doing that. Of those who lived in the Jyväskylä region and reported contacting a newspaper, almost half had made their contact through the Internet or E-mail, whereas in the countryside few used these channels.

Latest News – Important Elements in Online Newspapers

Possible changes in newspaper-reading practices can also be traced via the views young people have about online newspapers. Because of this, the respondents were asked what textual, formal and visual elements they thought were important in an online newspaper: news is quickly updated, it is easy to find the interesting news, the stories are short, giving feedback to the journalists is easy, writing letters to the editor is easy, participating in the polls and questionnaires is easy, reading online newspapers is trendy, they are nice to look at, they are inexpensive to read, or something else. The re-

spondents were able to choose between very important, quite important, not so important and not important at all.

On the one hand, online newspapers are strongly associated with the idea of recent news. The young people who read online newspapers regarded frequent updating of the news as the most important element. For two out of three (68%) it was very important that the latest news was online. Moreover, a third of the respondents found quick updating to be quite important. Especially the respondents in the 17–19 age group regarded it as very important: three in four of them were of this opinion, whereas a half of the 13–15-year-old respondents thought so.

Being able to read short news and being able to go through news sites quickly also proved to be important criteria for reading. Young people found it very important that the interesting news was easy for them to find. Nine out of ten (94%) of those who reported reading online newspapers considered this as a very or quite important element. All but two of the 17–19-year-old respondents reported easy and quick access to the stories as very important. A half of the younger boys and girls judged this criterion to be very important. On the other hand, half of the respondents felt it was very or quite important that online news be short. Girls appreciated short news more than the boys did.

The appearance of online newspapers proved to be all but insignificant for young people. Young people expect a structure that is easy to follow. Half of the respondents considered being nice to look at as very or quite important criteria for reading online newspapers. Girls in the age group of 13–15 paid more attention to visual appearance than others: the majority of them regarded a good appearance as very or quite important. By contrast, half of the younger boys and half of the older girls were of the same opinion, while only a third of the older boys thought so.

It seems that young Finns have learned to read online news free of charge. At least they proved to be unwilling to pay for reading it. Almost three out of four were of the opinion that it is very or quite important that online newspapers are inexpensive to read. A majority of the respondents reported not reading online newspapers because they saw it as trendy: three out of four (79%) excluded this from important elements affecting their news reading practices. Only few (5%) respondents, mainly younger girls, reported reading online newspapers because they felt it to be fashionable: almost a half of them regarded trendiness as a very or quite im-

portant reason for reading news from the Internet. Concurrently, not more than a third of the boys of the same age thought in a similar way. Only a handful of the older girls and boys were of this opinion.

Although young Finns' practices of news consumption position them as rather passive news receivers, the results also suggest ways to enhance reader participation. First, a chance to participate in online discussions proved to be important. Almost a half of the respondents considered this as very or quite important, although only nine of those who read online newspapers had taken part in online newspaper discussions. Moreover, half of the respondents felt that being able to give journalists feedback on their stories was very or quite important. Second, two out of three (65%) were of the opinion that it is very or quite important to be able to participate in online questionnaires, polls, and contests. The younger respondents considered this more important than the older ones: among 13–15-year-old respondents, two out of three regarded being able to vote and compete as very or quite important.

Important but Irrelevant – Views on News about Own Community

If young people are to be active in the making of newspapers, journalists need not only to discuss and deal with issues that are relevant to the everyday lives of young people, but also to do so in ways that make sense to them. The respondents were asked how often, in their opinion, specific arguments apply to news about their own communities. The arguments were: the news is about issues important to my everyday life, there is enough of it, it is about important local people and events, it gives me enough information, it provokes discussion, it is difficult to understand, and it interests me. The respondents were asked to answer for the newspaper they usually read. They could choose from the scale often– sometimes–seldom– never.

On the one hand, young people consider news about their local community as acceptable. Eight out of ten (79%) reported that local news deals with important local people and events. Nearly as many (76%) were of the opinion that news often or sometimes offers them important information. More than a half of the respondents (66%) also found that there was always or sometimes enough local news. As assumed, the influence of sex and age could be seen in the results. First, older respondents considered that local news offers them more information than the younger ones did. Sec-

ond, older girls proved to be more satisfied with the news about their local community than the boys were.

Although the young Finns studied were quite satisfied with local journalism, news seems to lack a connection to their everyday life. It is noteworthy that not more than a quarter considered news about their local community as often interesting to themselves. A half of the respondents brought up that this news sometimes interests them. Moreover, only one out of ten (8%) thought that the local news was often about issues that were important to their everyday lives. Almost half of the respondents (42%) reported finding the local news sometimes relevant to their personal lives. However, concurrently as many as a half of the youngsters were of the opinion that local and regional news only seldom or never dealt with issues important to them.

The girls and the older respondents were more satisfied with the local stories than the boys or younger respondents. In addition to this, their views differed according to what newspaper had been named as the most important one. The majority (85%) of respondents outside the Jyväskylä region considered the local news as offering them important information, whereas of those in the Jyväskylä region, approximately two out of three (70%) did so. *Koillis-Häme*, a local newspaper published in Jämsä, wrote news that almost three out of four (71%) of its readers considered as issues important to their everyday life. A half (53%) of the readers of *Keskisuomalainen*, the regional daily and leading newspaper of Central Finland, were of this opinion. Less than a third (29%) of those who set an afternoon paper as their number one newspaper thought in a similar way.

Local news seems to fail to encourage public discussion among young people. A minority (15%) of the respondents argued that news about their local community often provokes discussion. Moreover, less than a half (40%) were of the opinion that local news sometimes manages to encourage dialogue between and among the readers. At the same time, as many as 49% considered local news unsuccessful in this: in their view, local news seldom or never provokes discussion. The potential for discussion from the basis of local journalism was greater among the older respondents. A half (48%) of the 13–15-year-olds mentioned that local news often or sometimes facilitates dialogue, whereas out of the 17–19-year-old respondents, almost three out of four (71%) thought so. The local and regional news proved to be most successful in inspiring older girls to join discussions: a fifth (19%)

were of the opinion that local news often facilitates public dialogue, whereas among the younger boys not more than one out of ten was of this view.

Interesting differences between the newspapers came up: *Koillis-Häme* succeeded better in provoking discussion than the leading regional paper *Keskisuomalainen* or afternoon papers. Out of the youngsters who named the local paper as their most important newspaper, a fifth (22%) were of the opinion that it often provokes discussion. Rather few of the readers of *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Ilta-alehti* (15%) as well as *Keskisuomalainen* (14%) were of this opinion. This seems not to be because young people did not understand the news. Instead, the respondents claimed to be able to follow news stories without problems. Only 1% reported often finding the news about their local community difficult to understand. However, in certain ways, local papers as well as smaller papers appear to be easier for young people to read. Namely, when asked if they thought other newspaper material 'hid' local news, they said that this was the case, especially in *Keskisuomalainen*: among its readers two out of three (66%) were of this opinion, whereas not more than a quarter (25%) of *Koillis-Häme's* readers were of this opinion.

Conclusions

The Internet had not brought drastic changes in young Finns' newspaper reading practices at the millennium. First, online newspapers played quite a small part in the everyday media use of the Finnish young people in the study. Second, the Internet had increased the number of newspapers the young people read rather than bringing sudden or great changes in their previous reading practices. Especially the attraction of the online afternoon papers indicates that youngsters search for something extra from the net.

Approximately one in five young people have participated in the making of newspapers. However, this is not mainly because of or by means of new media. Their use of online newspapers can be described more as 'news consumption' than as the making of journalism. What the young Finns typically read in online papers was news: one of the most popular sections turned out to be sports. In addition, young people regarded frequent updating of the news as the most important element of an online newspaper. They also found it important that interesting news items were short and easy to find. Moreover, for many respondents, an attractive appearance was a major criterion for reading online

newspapers. Thus, the results suggest that stories on the Internet are closely associated with their being news and being the latest news. Their online newspaper use and their views about online papers also position the young people studied as an audience which consumes news rather than strives to contribute to the making of newspaper journalism.

However, signs of young people being producers of newspapers also came up. Still, the claims about new media changing newspaper use patterns are only slightly supported by the study. First, Finnish young people participated more often in the making of printed newspapers than in that of online ones. Actually, a smaller number of respondents reported contacting online newspaper journalists or writing to online newspapers than printed ones. Second, online newspapers did not bring major changes in the ways young people participated in the making of newspapers. The ways in which young people participated in the making of printed and online newspaper journalism were rather similar. Both types of newspapers attracted young readers to participate through gallups, questionnaires and polls as well as through their own texts. Interestingly, writing texts of their own turned out to be more popular in printed newspapers than in online papers. However, from the point of view of new communication technologies, E-mail clearly brought young people a new way to contact media. It changed boys' practices, since they, unlike girls, hardly ever contacted newspapers by sending them a letter or a postcard.

Among the ways of participating, giving feedback to journalists, sending them hints about potential stories or questions for stories proved to be rather rare, both in the case of printed and online papers. Because most of the youngsters also reported not reading staff information, it seems that young readers perceive journalistic texts as 'anonymous' and as packages of facts rather than as texts moulded by journalistic practices, values and ideologies.

Even though newspaper reading practices look more like news consumption than active production of journalism, young people's media use patterns also speak for a potential for enhanced reader participation. This is the case, at least in local and regional newspapers with which the young people studied typically made contact. Many of those who read online newspapers were also of the opinion that it is important to give journalists feedback on their stories, to have a chance to participate both in discussions as well as questionnaires, polls, and contests.

In order for young people to have a stronger role in the making of newspapers, journalists and teachers play a pivotal role as well as young people themselves. Accordingly, the results raise challenges for media education and local journalism. First, discussion in online newspapers needs to be included into the introduction into media at school. Instead of approaching the Internet, media literacy and new media as technological phenomena, media education could benefit from addressing questions about journalism itself: i.e. what is the role of the audience in journalism and what do people have to offer to journalism.

Second, few youngsters had been interviewed by journalists and a minority of the respondents considered news about their local community as in-

teresting to themselves. Very few thought the local news provoked discussion or was about issues important to their everyday life. It is, then, also journalists' task and in their interest to look for new ways to enrich local journalism – to reach issues and perspectives that are interesting and relevant to the readers' everyday lives, to create public participation, and to enhance dialogue. In order for participation in the making of journalism to be more than refreshing interactivity and competition, journalists and people of all ages are challenged to learn to look upon the experiences and understanding gained from everyday life as expertise – as important source of social, political and economic knowledge.

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