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SURVIVAL OF THE SLOWEST. A CASE STUDY OF TWO SLOW JOURNALISM OUTLETS IN ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT

Slow journalism challenges the trend of speed-driven media and, applying the principles of the slow food movement, seeks to improve the media diet of the audience and counterbalance the effects of "fast food". Little research has been conducted on the interaction between its principles and funding. Thus, one goal of this case study of two media initiatives is to examine how this form of journalism survives and maintains its principles with a small audience and intense competition in a small country. Using a triangulation of semi-structured interviews, observations, and a qualitative analysis of annual financial reports, the principles of the founders and funders in the operation of two outlets for slow journalism are examined. Maintaining the principles of slow journalism presents some difficulties in funding and running the outlets. However, there is a middle ground, and the principles themselves subtly function as both an advantage and a control mechanism.

Keywords: slow journalism ▪ business models ▪ small market ▪ operating principles ▪ alternative journalism ▪ magazine journalism ▪ digital journalism ▪ time pressure ▪ founders ▪ triangulation

1.   SURVIVAL OF THE SLOWEST.
A CASE STUDY OF TWO SLOW JOURNALISM OUTLETS IN ESTONIA

Contemporary society has undergone a process of acceleration, and journalism has been taken by the same wave. Response to the needs of the audience is accompanied by new technology, which allows for the acceleration of news production and is considered one of the guarantees of the profitability of journalism. As a counterbalance, the concept of slow journalism has been developed to supplement the media diet of the audience with healthier, high-quality journalism that is "good, clean, and fair", sustainable, and enjoyable, just like gourmet food, a luxury (Greenberg, 2007).

Since the term was coined, research on slow journalism has focused on Western countries, and the principles of the phenomenon have been defined by this research. Megan Le Masurier asserted (2015) that independent [slow journalism] magazines would collapse without profit, while noting that "small-scale independence allows

freedom from mainstream journalism organisations and their competing pursuit of profit and the ideology of journalistic speed" (Le Masurier, 2015), highlighting the potential tension between funding methods and the principles of slow journalism. This presents an important dilemma: when slow journalism outlets follow their ideals – by avoiding competition, scoops, profit-seeking, sensations, and celebrity (Berkey-Gerard, 2009) – they risk extinction.

Although the funding models of outlets have been briefly touched upon in previous studies, there has been no further investigation into how independent slow journalism outlets navigate between their principles and funding requirements and what – if any – conditions funders impose on these organisations. We examined two Estonian slow journalism outlets through interviews with two founders and three funders and used observations of editorial meetings and financial reports from both organisations to examine how they implement their stated principles and what compromises, if any, they make to survive.

2.   CHARACTERISTICS OF SLOW JOURNALISM

The concept of slow journalism was popularised in general terms by Susan Greenberg in Prospect Magazine in 2007, where she emphasised aspects such as depth, exceptionality, time spent, telling less-known stories, high-quality storytelling, and highlighting the essay, reportage, chronicle, and other nonfiction as a genre. Quality is later specified by David, Blumtritt and Köhler (2010) as a content and aesthetic principle and is also manifested in storytelling and narrative (Neveu, 2016). One aspect is sustainability – content that weathers the test of time (David et al., 2010) and goes beyond daily reporting. The literature review of slow journalism by Ines Mendes and Sandra Marinho (2022) showed that the words mostly used by researchers were slow, journalism, news, media, narrative, new, literary, quality, and documentary. But as Mendes and Marinho point out, the business model as a research approach is rarely used.

We noticed that the characteristics attributed to slow journalism revolve around the axes of why slow journalism should exist and what and how it seeks to achieve with the overarching theme of an ethical approach. For example, the goals of giving voice to the voiceless, i.e. underrepresented groups (Palau-Sampio, 2018) and creating understanding (Craig, 2016; Ball, 2016) are pursued by avoiding polarisation (Drok & Hermans, 2015), sensationalism, celebrity and competitiveness, focusing on quality and untold stories (Berkey-Gerard, 2009), diving into topics and being creative (Greenberg, 2007), using narrative storytelling frequently (Neveu, 2016), treating both contributors (Rauch, 2018) and audiences fairly, and giving both time to engage with the topic. The stories are often long (Le Masurier, 2015), entertaining and balanced (Greenberg, 2013), ethical, thorough (Gess, 2012), and complement fast-paced news journalism (Drok & Hermans, 2016). Le Masurier (2015) notes that not all forms of slow journalism are the same; they can have different focuses and

genres – some are more investigative, others focus on collaboration or local communities. Greenberg emphasises that a long story provides the opportunity to add more nuance and consider counterarguments, giving the writer time to recognise their biases (2013). At the same time, not every longer story (although it usually requires a longer form to go in depth) or every outlet with a long publication interval is necessarily slow journalism. Le Masurier (2015) notes that a slow publication cycle increases the opportunity to enjoy the reading and that it is likely to be alternative and small media. In addition, there are the possibilities offered by the medium: first, the permanence of print media; and second, the linear nature of the print medium, which promotes enjoyment of what is read (Le Masurier, 2015; Abrahamson, 2015). According to Harold Gess (2012), the slow food ideal of "good, clean, and fair" means information that matters to the community is thoroughly researched, of high quality, ethical, does not harm the community, and avoids stereotypes. Depth can balance speed, as readers who feel that more constructive and in-depth stories offer a broader and richer insight into the topic are also more likely to engage with the story (Kormelink & Meijer, 2020). Lydia Cheng (2021) summarises the arguments of previous researchers: the concept of slow journalism is more descriptive and less prescriptive, flexible rather than rigid.

Another way to define something is to examine what it is not (Cheng, 2021), i.e. "anti-branding" (Dowling, 2016). Since slow journalism emerged in response to the problems of fast-paced media, it defines itself in part by opposing or complementing them (Drok & Hermans, 2016). From its inception, the slow journalism philosophy has been linked to dissatisfaction with the ever-increasing pace of other forms of journalism, abundance of advertising (Dowling, 2016) and the problems this creates for both the public and journalism (Le Masurier, 2015; Reinardy, 2010). Opposition to other media or its attempt to improve it is also expressed in the news values of slow journalism, it is foremost guided by editorial values rather than news values (Carretero & Barriain, 2016); the emphasis is on an editorial philosophy that dictates the style, topics, and approach. Slow journalism has similarities with other forms of journalism (see Figure 1), but it differs in its core concept: it is non-competitive, places more emphasis on context than speed, takes time to research, focuses on storytelling, values accuracy and quality, does not try to be the first to report, and avoids celebrities, sensationalism, and high-profile events (Berkey-Gerard, 2009). Slowness is only one principle, albeit important; it is a tool that helps achieve its goals by taking time (in data collection, creation, shaping, publishing, and consumption) to focus, reflect, dig deeper, search for appropriate sources, create context, enjoy, etc. Slowness helps to appreciate the "other" (Ball, 2016; Thomas, 2016). Because of its slowness, it can focus on these parts of society that otherwise go unnoticed or unreported; it is not constrained by time pressures to use authorities as sources (Craig, 2016).

It is not detached from other journalism fields but instead is related to other forms, such as public and solution oriented constructive (Hermans & Drok, 2018), narrative-based, personal storytelling of literary, long-form New or gonzo journalism

(Romero-Rodríguez, Tejedor & Castillo-Abdul, 2021, Belt & South, 2016) that enable the audience to connect the unfamiliar to the familiar to understand events (Krieken, 2019). It is similar to investigative journalism, which can also be of high quality, long, and comprehensive and can open up new topics by playing the role of a watchdog. Rauch (2018) adds similarities for example with creative nonfiction, and citizen journalism. The latter is similar to slow journalism in that it is collaborative (Le Masurier, 2015), but although the contribution of the audience is important, it is not central. Craig (2016) adds that data journalism and disaster reporting also share similarities with slow journalism by taking time and using public input. Le Masurier adds the term "slow magazines" when researching indie magazines (2020) that are often small-scale, alternative, critical, and not profit oriented and mentions "slow lifestyle" magazines with the example of *Kinfolk*. Cheng (2021) compares slow journalism and "lifestyle" magazines. The latter can also have a slow publication cycle, but Cheng draws the line by their content, focus, and approach, as these magazines focus on how they can simplify the personal lives of their audience rather than solve societal problems (Cheng, 2021), nor do all of these necessarily have a slow publication cycle.

In order to differ from other forms of journalism, slow journalism should follow some principles that distinguish it from other forms of journalism; we call these the operating principles of slow journalism, which justify its existence and explain its role in the wider field of journalism and society. The operating principles of slow journalism can be defined by the content, the working processes, or the specific relationships with its audience, all of which follow the core mindset of social responsibility of the outlet. Theodore Peterson (1984) described six tasks of journalism in the social responsibility theory as providing information and discussion; enlightening the public; safeguarding the rights of the individual; servicing the economic system (advertising); entertainment; and maintaining self-sufficiency. Slow journalism operates (or is expected to operate) on the principles that prioritise the first three: the needs of the community and understanding come first. Certainly, slow journalistic outlets can be and often are also entertaining, have a viable business model, and can include advertisements, but these are viewed through the prism of the first three, and in cases of conflict, preference is given to these. The overlap of the concept of slow journalism with other forms and genres of journalism is shown in Figure 1, which is based on the generalisations of the extensive literature review for this study.
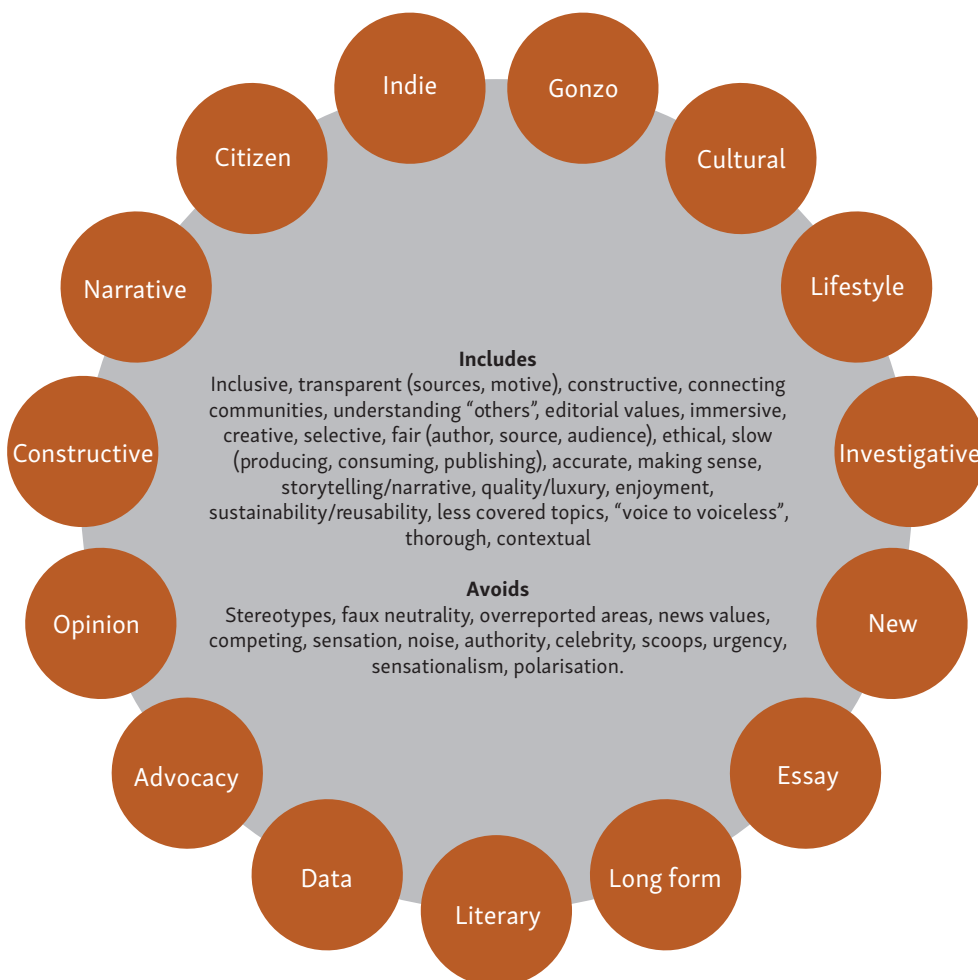
Figure 1: Slow journalism principles (central circle) and associated forms and genres of journalism (surrounding circles) based on authors in paragraph "Characteristics of slow journalism".

As one can see, a large part of the principles of slow journalism comes from the desire to balance the problems associated with the revenue or survival oriented management of the outlets that is prevalent in other media, which in turn often leads to the very problems that slow journalism seeks to avoid and counterbalance. Since slow journalism tries to alleviate the problems that come with that kind of approach, it can't use the same operating principles and its ways to fund its activities are limited. It has to find new business models, at the same time trying to uphold high standards and costly principles that should help avoid the pitfalls of fast-paced media.

For the current research, the question is how the operating principles of slow journalism, which set high ideals for journalistic production, can be implemented in practice. To answer this question, we examine two cases from a small media

market where economic realities can limit their ability to uphold the ideals of slow journalism.

3.   CASE DESCRIPTION AND METHODS OF STUDY

3.1.   Case description

We examined two media outlets in Estonia that practice slow journalism. These are *Edasi* and *Levila*, outlets that combine written, audio, image and video formats in their content. They operate in Estonia, which has a population of 1.3 million, where the media market is saturated and highly competitive (Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2019). The media sector in Estonia is primarily shaped by the rules of the market and the behaviour of the audience; the revenues of media companies are threatened by global companies, and resources for the production of quality journalism are declining (Kõuts-Klemm et al., 2019). Although there are a variety of outlets, which could mean a diverse media landscape, many of them are concentrated in commercial media houses. Journalists are expected to produce "units" quickly without much time to process information (Himma-Kadakas, 2018). Against this background, it seems rather difficult for a niche outlet to build its business model on demanding journalistic production principles and sustain its business in the form of slow journalism.

Edasi (founded in 2016) and *Levila* (founded in 2019) have chosen relatively different formats. *Edasi* describes itself as slow journalism, publishes a quarterly print magazine with most of its online content behind a paywall. *Edasi* publishes advertisements. Its articles cover social, cultural, business, lifestyle, travel, and well-being topics, and are often published as analytical opinion pieces by experts and as interviews (*Edasi*, 2022). The outlet *Levila* calls itself a media lab (*Levila*, 2022) and experiments with formats and genres (radio plays, documentaries, articles, comics, books, short web comedy series), focusing on social issues. Their long pieces are not published regularly. *Levila* does not publish advertising, and the content is mostly free. It also offers several donor packages that provide varying degrees of access to editorial workflows and the opportunity to get an overview of what goes on behind the scenes; the most expensive package allows people to suggest story ideas. In both outlets, the founders serve as editors-in-chief.

Both outlets have funders, but while *Levila* relies heavily on funding from investors and donors (in 2021, its profit was €-573,480, personnel costs were €413,482 and revenue was €34,561), *Edasi* is mainly financed by operating revenues (in 2021, its profit was €1,109, personnel costs were €107,515 and revenue was €294,680, with sales revenues increasing from €38,405 in 2017 to €283,233 in 2021) (annual reports of *Edasi* and *Levila*). As both companies are balancing their operating principles and their financial capabilities, the study will show how they strike a balance between the two in the long run.

3.2.   Methods of study

Interviews were conducted with the founders and funders to formulate the operating principles. As the second method, we observed their workflows and interactions during editorial meetings, with 10 participants. For background information, we studied public data from their websites and financial reports submitted to the tax authority and Estonian financial institutions. We conducted semi-structured interviews with both the founders and the main funders of the outlets – five interviews in all from February to June 2022. The interviews with the founders lasted about 1.5 hours and took place in person, while the interviews with the funders lasted on average half an hour and were conducted via Zoom. All five interviewees were male and aged between 30 and 60 years.[1] The questions were prepared based on previous studies and information published on the websites of *Edasi* and *Levila* and in other outlets.

The observations in *Edasi* and *Levila* took place six months after the interviews. The observations in four newsroom sessions lasted approximately 2 hours, with the number of participants ranging from four in one newsroom to six in another. During the sessions, the passive observer took field notes on topics based on keywords that related to the previously conducted interviews or were otherwise relevant to slow journalism and its principles based on literature. The participants in the observations were the editors-in-chief (e.g., the founders), authors (*Levila*), editors, and assistant to the editor-in-chief (*Edasi*). The observer avoided active interaction with the participants during the observations, although he did respond to questions when asked (mostly by editors-in-chief).

To analyse the interview transcriptions and observation notes, we used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis protocol. We used keywords appearing in previous research: polarisation (conflicts, politics, etc.), fairness (sources, writers, pay, etc.), time (fast, slow, taking time, urgency), principles, focus (issues), responsibility, clicks (clickbait), society, audience, contributors, quality, celebrity (fame), sensationalism, funding, advertising, noise, reach, ethics, sources (giving voice), periphery, sustainability, competition, storytelling, form (genre), timeliness, and enjoyment. The participants in the study gave their informed consent, confirming that they are aware of the aims of the study and their confidentiality.

In order to analyse the operating principles of the outlets, we sought answers to the questions of how the founders and funders decided on the establishment of the outlet, what goals they set for themselves and the outlet, and what challenges they faced in operating the outlet. On this basis, we formulate the main operating principles of the outlet and highlight the tensions between the overarching principles and everyday practice.

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1   The gender imbalance is explained by the fact that in Estonia the amount of female top leaders is less than 40%, being still much higher than in other Western countries (Grant Thornton, 2021).

4.   RESULTS

The interviews with the editors and funders of the slow journalism outlets show that starting and running an outlet in general, and a slow journalism one in particular, presents a number of challenges, especially in a small media market, from funding to reaching audiences and finding contributors.

4.1.   Slow journalism focuses on social issues, not on profit

The founders and funders cited general problems with journalism as their main driver to engage in slow journalism to counteract the click economy that divides society and incites adversarial social discussions using a plethora of gossip, negativity, sensationalism, the mixing of broadsheet and tabloid content, an excess of advertising, and noise. *Edasi*'s founder and editor-in-chief cites the outlet's goals as building bridges between different strata, offering analytical articles to counteract the abundance of information, creating quality journalism, and expanding Estonia's landscape of thought.

> R2: When you talk to people on the street about journalism, what do they generally say? They agree that there is an overabundance of information, that there is a lot of negativity, and that serious reporting is mixed with yellow [journalism]/.../with advertising, right? And that usually leads to a person scrolling. Why does he scroll? Because he cannot find relevant content.

He also adds a personal motive: he felt the need to be needed, self-realisation, and improving the world.

The interviewees noted that it is difficult to start a new niche media outlet in the Estonian media market without resorting to the proven business principles of advertiser attraction, sensationalism, and clickbait headlines.

> R5: The daily media seems to be focused on shorter targets and more scandalous headlines. The business model, which is very click and advertising based, breaks into the newsroom, where there is a ranking [of pieces] on the wall of which stories got more clicks today – then you get stories that get clicked. At the same time, we all consume global media, and you can take any weekend edition of *The Atlantic* or *The New York Times* with a long story, read it with interest, and know that the journalist behind it had some kind of an incentive model that allowed them to spend six or twelve months researching the story, so you get something completely different. And we felt like there could be more of that.

The outlets are quite autonomous from the influence of funders, as the funders do not interfere in their daily activities or management, citing lack of time and expertise. However, they are informed about the activities every 6 to 12 months, and the positive aspect of this systematic contact was highlighted: it builds trust. One funder was part of the original founding team and communicates regularly with the founder, but is otherwise not involved.

The funders felt that Estonian entrepreneurs have reached a level of maturity, or a sufficient level of prosperity, where they no longer looked simply for financial gain but donated money out of a sense of mission and a desire to improve society. The funders' point of view is important here: they speculated that journalism as a whole and these outlets in particular are probably not a profitable business. However, for the good of society, they and other entrepreneurs believe they should support these outlets, while at the same time stating as a criterion that they would cut funding if the outlets resorted to the same methods and principles as other media, thereby making the outlets' operating principles their control mechanisms that motivate the funders either to support or quit supporting the given outlet according to the choices it makes.

4.2.   Slow journalism outlets use editorial values instead of news values

While respondents were concerned about the state of journalism in general, they also said they had adopted some specific ways to achieve their goals and provide more thorough, high-quality journalism. We explain the principles in two dimensions: how they compile content, and what tensions exist between the principles of compiling content and reality. From the interviews, it appears that editorial rather than news media values apply (Carretero & Bariain, 2016). The observations show that during the editorial meetings of *Levila*, participants discussed how the outlet should differ from other media, look for other topics, try to tell stories through experiences, avoid judgment, and not act as a typical piece of investigative journalism or national television.

An interviewee from *Levila* told us that each year they choose a few focus areas for the outlet, carefully selecting topics they are going to address. For example, *Levila*'s main topics for 2022 were nature and mental health. With problem stories, *Levila* also tries to show the audience constructive ways to cope with the problems and, in this way, reduce anxiety.

In putting together *Edasi*'s content, an interviewee said the focus is on quality, connecting people, and creating understanding, rather than dividing groups, and one of *Edasi*'s slogans is "less noise". On the basis of the observations, the participants in *Edasi*'s editorial meeting discussed how the stories should be constructive, not divisive, and headlines shouldn't be clickbaits. The interviewee describes quality as something that is made with heart and dedication, that pleases the creator himself,

that is thoughtful, has no mistakes or typos, retains its value for a long time, and is aesthetic, citing Apple products as an example.

> R2: I want to surround myself with things that are made with dedication and heart. If you make something with heart, people will like it, so it's the same with *Edasi* – in a way, we are making a magazine for ourselves /.../. One that's beautifully packaged, with stories in it, and I want this product in my life.

One of the ideals of *Levila*'s founder is the principle of "cooperation rather than truth". He illustrated it by saying that social discussions tend to focus on their own truth and turn into controversy, but discussions should start from the truth that the parties share, and from there the problem can be dissected. One of *Levila*'s goals is to create this common space, using the dialogical principle of slow journalism (David et al., 2010). *Levila*'s interviewee also consistently emphasised respect – both to the sources and to the audience – and hopes to create a trusting relationship this way. We noticed during the observations that when discussing sources at an editorial meeting, the participants kept in mind that the sources shouldn't be harmed and tried to come up with ways to offer something in return for their trouble.

Both founders and funders emphasised that the main principle of the outlets is to create socially relevant content rather than to be commercially profitable. At the same time, observations showed that *Edasi* places greater emphasis on profitability. The sentiment of being relevant but without causing stress for both writers and readers, as well as being timeless, is cited as one of the goals of the outlets.

> R4: It [*Edasi*] is so stress-free, right? Like ... this slow journalism is a good expression; it characterises it well /.../ even six months after publishing, simply log in and read, and there are interesting approaches from people on [various] topics; I really like it. Some stories are really timeless.

Observations showed that both outlets still use topicality as a tool (seasonal topics like picking mushrooms in autumn) but not as a focus, more as a storytelling instrument (discussing picking mushrooms against the backdrop of nature and deforestation, in accordance with editorial values).

The recurring principles of slow journalism mentioned in the interviews and during observations were working long and meticulously with sources, transparency (avoiding anonymity), avoiding polarisation, focusing on community, reaching underrepresented groups and sources, using the long form and editorial values rather than news values, and quality assurance. The observations confirmed the application of these in practice.

> R1: I realised that this is how you can do it – that you do not polarise, you do not judge, you just go over the topic with people as if you were on a journey. From that, the strategy evolved /.../ the next most important thing is that we give voice to persons [sources] and do not bend their words.

During the observations, timeliness and timelessness were discussed repeatedly. Journalists tried to find ways to rise above the superficial and expiring nature of everyday reporting, but current events could not be ignored altogether since one problem arises from the tension between timeliness and slowness: while editors see the timeless nature of published content as one of their values, topical events of great significance can interfere with their production cycle. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine made some nearly finished stories obsolete.

Edasi's interviewee believed it is important to use well known experts in the field who, in addition to their expertise, love their field and can speak well about it. Observations showed that during the editorial meetings, the possibilities of involving various renowned co-authors, their competence and storytelling skills, as well as their prominence were discussed. In addition to the magazine's credo of being "inspiring and educational", the interviewee also articulated the premise of addressing "complex topics simply and simple topics interestingly", which limits the choice of contributors. While *Levila* had trouble finding contributors who met the expectations of the outlet, *Edasi*'s founder had no problem finding contributors and linked the impact of the magazine to that of the writers.

While *Levila* operates mostly without revenue from their content, they simultaneously pay more for their authors' work and give them more time (up to a few months) to research and create content, which is consistent with slow journalism's principle of treating writers fairly (Rauch, 2018). The principle of fair treatment of co-writers or assistants was also observed at the editorial meetings.

Both founders were aware of the paradox that arises when monetisation opportunities collide with the ideals of the outlet in finding advertisers, subscribers, and funders and in creating stories: if you produce more and are more aggressive content, funding and audiences are likely to be bigger, but you would have to compromise on your ideals to do so.

Edasi's interviewee noted that these small and slow media outlets are competing with larger, well-established, and faster media outlets, and audiences do not discriminate between whether they are small or large. They expect the same level of quality, even if the smaller outlet has fewer resources. He added that the small outlet must be even better than a large one to remain competitive and compared the outlet to Estonia, which is small but unique, necessary for the world.

It was observed at the meetings that the focus was on creating content that is different from other, faster forms of journalism.

> Editorial board member: If we used the same storytelling style [as other media], it would go faster.
> R1: We don't want that.

4.3.   Slow journalism is in the service of the audience

According to the founders, the goal is not to create slow pieces; a thorough breakdown and inclusion of sufficient context of the subject require a longer format, but creative techniques are used to engage the audience (Gauxachs, Sanz & Bosch, 2019). The founders said that in choosing topics and the manner in which they are told, one criterion is the values or goals of the outlet, while the other is the impact on society and the audience. In terms of audience, *Edasi*'s interviewee was pleased with the results of media monitoring, which showed a wide range of readers, but *Levila*'s interviewee was concerned about reaching outlying areas. The observations confirmed *Levila*'s daily goal of reaching and reporting on places and people outside the main population centres. They struggle to find a concept that appeals to an audience different from their own group (founders, funders, contributors) and who would also be willing to pay for content; they want to reach a broader audience.

One of *Edasi*'s mottos is "complicated made simple", and the editor-in-chief admitted that because of his teaching background he also thinks good language is important. *Levila*'s founder said that experts used as sources in the media tend to use elitist (e.g., bureaucratic) language that is hard to understand. He emphasised that if the audience were not offered free, high-quality, unifying journalistic content, they might turn to websites that offer free content but whose goal seems to be to polarise society.

> R1: We want to increase our audience outside of Tallinn [capital city of Estonia]. /.../ I feel that young people like us more for our design and essence, but young people do not visit our website often enough because the content is not directly targeted at them.

Finding a funding model proves difficult due to the paradox between the outlet's principles and its funding possibilities. Since the goal is to unite and not polarise the audience while reaching a less affluent audience in outlying areas outside the capital, *Levila*'s interviewee explained that content cannot be placed behind a paywall. Nor is it possible to use controversial titles, scoops, sensational items, or clickbait and thereby attract the curiosity of advertisers and the audience.

> R1: And our problem as to why we cannot make money ourselves is that maybe with a paywall we would immediately hit the same problem; we would be talking to people who are similar to us. People like us are already our audience and are also willing to pay money for it /.../ maybe we would

not get rich enough to cover all our expenses, but we could make a normal income /... / we deliberately avoid that.

One of the donors of *Levila* said he believes that paywalls cause audiences to move to other sites that offer free access to low-quality content.

> R5: When you put good content behind a paywall, you create space [in the media landscape] for bad content.

4.4.   Tension between journalistic self-fulfilment and sustainability

Since the analysed outlets were born out of personal dissatisfaction (both founders and funders) with the media landscape, and in part represent a path to self-realisation, the question is how sustainable they can be in transferring personal motivation to organisational operation. *Levila*'s interviewee explained that, on the one hand, they are still looking for a sustainable funding model, but the goal is not necessarily to survive at any cost; instead, they aim to improve society and the media landscape, and if this results in a few good articles that serve as examples for other outlets, then the goal is already achieved. At the same time, the founder considers the desire to survive at any cost, sacrificing values and ethics in order to publish, maintain institutions, and make a profit, to be some of the biggest problems facing the Estonian media.

> R1: I understand, it [survival] is quite reasonable and all. But what if we just did the best we can? And then comes the moment of truth: do we close or not, does someone give us more money or not. It [the outlet] does not have to last forever, but if these stories make a difference by that point, well, then that's good enough.

According to the founder, *Edasi* has approximately five major donors, in addition to subscribers and advertising. 85% of the income is self-earned, and more than half of the income comes from subscriptions and retail sales, with the remainder coming from advertising, book sales, and video projects. The smaller circulation of a small magazine and the relatively high cost of advertising are obstacles in finding advertisers, which they try to counter by emphasising the aspect of social responsibility: the importance of supporting a socially responsible magazine that creates value for society and reaffirms the trend of philanthropy among business circles.

> R2: It is a challenge to talk to these companies [and make clear] the fact that it fits well with the concept of socially responsible business, just like I mentioned earlier: slow journalism, less noise /.../ For companies and those who invest, the topic of how you give back to society is becoming more and more important.

At the beginning, *Edasi*'s articles were free, and the reader was offered the opportunity to donate voluntarily; however, as with *Levila*, this did not generate enough income. Now *Edasi* publishes advertisements but doesn't do it indiscriminately; advertisements have to add value and offer something meaningful to the reader. During the observations while discussing the publication of special issues, the participants considered its profitability but also its benefits to readers and advertisers.

Levila's interviewee does not rule out the inclusion of advertisements, but considers that, given the small size of Estonia, there are not many advertisers suitable for this niche outlet. He considers it a possibility that alternative journalism in Estonia can only survive with the help of funders, but is still looking for new funding methods. He also noted problems with using international funding platforms like Patreon, since less tech-savvy monolingual audiences can't necessarily be expected to use these.

A significant contrast between the outlets was apparent during the observations at the editorial meetings, which is not only related to their format: at *Edasi*'s meeting, there was a greater emphasis on discussions on the reach (clicks) and saleability of the stories, which is related to the economic model of the outlet, since the magazine sells advertising space (as opposed to *Levila*) and has subscribers. For example, while discussing a special issue of the magazine, its potential for attracting advertisers was discussed, but at the next editorial meeting, the need to not give too much space to advertisers was also emphasised. So, although the ideal of slow journalism should focus on societal interests, in an outlet that tries to finance itself in a more traditional way (subscribers and advertising), financial goals are also taken into account in addition to societal needs.

Observations showed that *Levila*'s meetings differed from this approach since advertising does not appear in the outlet, so these interests were not taken into account. At the same time, some overlap can be found in the emphasis of the two outlets on the reach of stories, because even though *Levila* did not directly count clicks on articles, during the observations the social impact of stories was still considered important, which was also one of the goals noted at *Edasi*'s meetings. The goals of *Levila* (trying to reach an audience outside the main centres, avoiding polarisation) and *Edasi* (avoiding noise, "building bridges") concerning audiences coincide with the principles of slow journalism. However, *Edasi* has difficulties earning an income since they are not reaching enough people. In order to reach a wider audience, *Levila* has published stories in other outlets, considering the distribution of stories to be more important than competition (similar to Berkey-Gerard, 2009). However, *Levila*'s interviewees noted that this makes it difficult to establish its brand, and that, in turn, may make it harder to gain recognition and generate revenue.

> R1: The reason we chose ETV [Estonian national TV station] for the premiere [of our documentary] is that we realised that on our channel we might be left at best with about ten thousand viewers, which would be a waste /.../

> [on ETV] more than one hundred and thirty thousand people have watched the film.

Thus, to some extent, the size of the audience and their willingness to pay for the content seem to be interpreted as proof of the social relevance of the outlets.

The funders said that they are essentially prepared to continue with the funding to a certain extent indefinitely, while at the same time trying to encourage other entrepreneurs in their circles to do the same.

By applying the creed of slow food – good, clean and fair – that has been transferred to the form of slow journalism, the treatment of authors and other participants (such as translators) in the creation of a story was addressed during the observation of editorial meetings by the founder of *Levila*, in that he proactively provides remuneration to contributors or notes that while volunteer participation is great, it should still be rewarded with fair pay. The observations of the meetings showed a difference in adherence to other principles: in addition to the publication schedules of articles, at *Edasi*'s meetings central aspects included monitoring the popularity of the articles and, when discussing special issues, encouraging advertising in these was on the table. During the observations of *Levila*'s meetings, the founder repeatedly reminded the contributors of the outlet's principles and social goals (big topics) when discussing topics.

> R1: ... but how is this a big topic? It doesn't talk about addiction; it's about relatively well-off people who grow cannabis. It sounds like a niche [topic] to me.

5. CONCLUSION

This case study examined the characteristics of two slow journalism outlets in Estonia through interviews with their founders and funders and observations of editorial meetings. Both institutions were founded on the basis of media criticism sparked by dissatisfaction with prevailing trends in the media, a view that aligns with the origins of slow journalism (Drok & Hermans, 2016), but they approach their goals (improving media quality, creating understanding, reducing conflicts in society, etc.) in different ways. Both outlets operate on the principles of avoiding polarisation, harm to society, sensationalism, competition, and speed; creating understanding of the "other" and society; taking time to create and consume stories; focusing on high quality in both analysis and storytelling and in aesthetics; fairness, timeless issues, and who they give a voice to and how; being community-oriented, ethical, and giving context; following a slow publication cycle; having fun creating; and following editorial values, not news values. They differ in the principles of using contributors and sources and in their funding models: *Levila* does not focus on using well-known experts, while *Edasi* uses well-known experts as co-writers. *Levila* relies mostly on

funders and focuses on free digital and multimedia content, while *Edasi* publishes a quarterly print magazine for subscribers, and the digital content is mostly behind a paywall.

It became clear that it is difficult for such niche outlets to operate profitably in the competitive media landscape of a small country while applying the higher standards of slow journalism. This is due to their small audience and because their principles limit money-making opportunities by, for example, not allowing clickbait headlines or controversial articles (Drok & Hermans, 2016). So while the outlets' conventional funding options are limited, they rely (*Levila* almost entirely, *Edasi* less so) on funders. The small media market means there are not many possible financiers among the population, which makes the few funders or advertisers available to the outlets all the more influential. There is a risk to autonomy because the fewer funders there are, the more weight the demands of a funder can carry. It was clear from the interviews that funders do not interfere in the day-to-day decisions and are motivated to continue supporting the outlets as long as the outlets follow the principles on which they were founded. In this sense, the outlets are in a way the face of the founders and funders, and it is difficult to predict how it would affect the principles of the outlets if the funders changed their current views.

At the same time, funders supporting these principles and requiring the outlets to adhere to them could act as an additional control mechanism that keeps the outlets "on track". If the outlets were to deviate from their current path, e.g., to reach bigger audiences, the funders could cut their support. In this sense, then, the principles work in several ways: they justify the outlets' existence, set them apart from other outlets, and motivate funders, while limiting the outlets' economic options. Here, the comparison between *Levila* and *Edasi* shows a kind of a middle ground, where the newer *Levila* represents a wing of non-profit slow journalism that has more autonomy to focus on their idealistic goals and less on survival (even opposing the mindset of surviving), while *Edasi* is 85% self-sustaining, has subscribers and advertising, and focuses – in addition to slow journalism principles – on how to survive and attract readers and advertisers (i.e., lifestyle sections and special issues). While *Edasi* is more in the middle ground and closer to lifestyle magazines with its content and economic model, it is still seen by its funders as counterbalancing the harmful effects of fast-paced media. It has found a way to navigate between the traditional financing model and the idealistic principles of slow journalism, as the philosophy itself leaves room for different paths and formats (Le Masurier, 2015; Cheng, 2021). In this sense, *Edasi* could be described as being closer to the "traditional" form of journalism while at the same time adhering to enough slow journalism principles to stand out in the eyes of funders, advertisers, and subscribers and striving ultimately to have a positive impact on society and the media landscape. The inclusion of advertising, lifestyle sections, a paywall, and *Edasi*'s focus on well-known names as contributors can be seen as compromises with the principles of slow journalism. This strategy has helped the magazine steadily improve its financial sustainability over the six years of

its existence. At the same time, *Edasi* emphasises the social responsibility of advertisers, and advertisements must add value to the audience. In this sense, advertising must also adhere to the principles of slow journalism.

There also arises the question of impact; the small size and alternative nature of the outlets are related to one of the characteristics of slow journalism: the luxury aspect (Greenberg, 2007), because luxury items are usually scarce and at the same time more expensive to produce and more pleasant to consume. Their smallness raises the question of the extent to which a niche luxury product can finance itself while contributing to the "media diet" of the general public to support the democratic social order (Craig, 2016). Most people cannot or do not want to spend money on luxury goods when they can get fast food cheaper or even for free.

Levila's non-profit model, combined with the attitude of focusing on the greater good rather than survival, allows for more autonomy and freedom in decision-making, greater adherence to the principles of (slow) journalism, and ignoring the traditional funding models of other media outlets that would make it difficult to adhere to their principles. And while Le Masurier (2015) assumed that the alternative media may cease to exist without making a profit, this case study showed that even in a saturated media market in a small country there can be enough socially responsible funders for slow journalism outlets, provided the outlets uphold the high ethical and qualitative principles that set this form of journalism apart from other media.

In the context of this case study, it appears that it is possible for a form of slow journalism to exist that adheres to the principles of high quality, non-competition, social responsibility, fairness, slowness and non-confrontationality. And while adherence to the principles of slow journalism may limit the funding opportunities of the particular outlet, there is a space for it in which it is possible to adopt certain parts of the principles while incorporating both non-profit and traditional media funding models. Future research could compare different slow journalistic outlets based on content analysis, their operating principles, and business models.

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