The future imaginary of journalism
A textual analysis of journalism as a discursive practice for imagining futures

The theoretical aim of this study is to define journalism as a discursive practice for imagining futures. The methodological aim is to develop a method for textual analysis suitable for studying futures imagined in journalistic texts. The empirical aim is to study futures imagined in news texts and editorials related to climate summits and key moments in Finnish agricultural policy.

In this study, imagining futures is defined as a discursive practice that concerns the articulation of the future as an object of knowledge (aiming to predict or foretell it) and as an object of action (aiming to shape the future to a particular direction). Based on earlier research journalism’s future imaginary is defined tentatively as a discursive practice that mainly aims to articulate knowledge of the future and is cautious of articulating and participating in efforts to shape futures through action.

As an object of textual analysis journalism’s future imaginary is defined as consisting of 1) speech acts that articulate knowledge of the future or possibilities to shape the future through action, 2) narrative choices related to representing speech acts in journalism’s discourse and 3) meanings given to the future in the speech acts.

The research material consists of 299 articles from the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat and the 2968 speech acts related to the future uttered in these articles. The material related to Finnish agricultural policy consists of news texts and editorials related to six key moments between 1944 and 2013 and editorials about agricultural policy published during 21 sample periods between 1946 and 1994. The material related to climate summits consists of news texts and editorials published during the Copenhagen (2009), Durban (2011) and Warsaw (2013) climate summits.

In the analysis, four kinds of speech acts are identified. Predictive speech acts aim to predict the future. Directive speech acts aim to give directions, instructions or commands in order to transform the future in a certain direction. Commissive
speech acts express a commitment to a certain kind of future by making promises or decisions. Expressive speech acts express emotions or attitudes related to the future, such as uncertainty or fear.

In the analysis of narrative choices, the main dimension is the distinction between a journalistic narrator’s future imaginary and quoted future imaginaries. Narrator’s imaginary refers to speech acts uttered by the journalistic narrator. Quoted future imaginaries refer to speech acts directly or indirectly quoted by the narrator. The meanings given to the future in the speech acts are analyzed by identifying nodal points that link speech acts to discourses about the future.

The future imaginary manifest in the micro level of speech acts is contextualized by analyzing it in relation to three macro level narratives of change derived from research literature: 1) The narrative of Finnish socio-political discourses, 2) the narrative of the mediatization of politics and 3) the narrative of a late modern future.

The narrative of Finnish socio-political discourses claims that there have been two major discursive transformations in the post-war period. First, a transformation from a discourse highlighting moral concerns that was dominant immediately after the war (1940s and 1950s) to a discourse emphasizing scientific planning of social policies (1960s and 1970s). Second, a transformation beginning from the 1980s towards a socio-political discourse underlining economic competition and competitiveness.

The narrative concerning the mediatization of politics claims that journalistic texts related to politics have increasingly been shaped by the logic of journalism rather than by the logics of other discursive practices such as institutional decision-making.

The late modern future narrative claims that the future has simultaneously become increasingly important and problematic in the transformation from modernity towards late modernity.

According to the study, future was mainly articulated as an object of knowledge and only rarely as an object of action. Predictive speech acts dominated both the narrator’s future imaginary and quoted future imaginaries. Directive, commissive and expressive speech acts were relatively rare.

From the perspective of narrative choices, two kinds of future imaginaries were identified. Porous imaginary refers to a narratively unstructured imaginary that dominated the research material from the 1940s and 1950s. Journalism’s future imaginary was mainly based on reproducing documents of institutional decision making such as government bills or committee reports.
The stratification and erosion of the future imaginary refers to a double-faced process that manifested in the research material from the 1960s onwards. Journalism gained performative autonomy after becoming more narratively structured and less dependent on other discursive practices. Consequently, journalism’s future imaginary came to be structured around the narrator’s speech acts and the extensive reproduction of institutional documents ended. The stratification of journalism’s future imaginary simultaneously eroded its social role as a neutral meta-discourse of modern societies as its performative autonomy exposed it to criticism.

From the perspective of meanings given to the future, six discourses about the future were identified in the research material. Throughout the research material, the future gained meanings in relation to institutional decision-making processes (decision-making discourse). The progression of decision-making was constantly speculated. In the early parts of the research material, the contents of documents related to institutional decision making were reproduced in journalism’s discourse.

The other identified discourses reflected a transformation from a politically structured discourse of the immediate postwar period that highlighted the costs of agricultural policy (national economy discourse) to a politically neutral discourse that emphasized the systematic nature of agricultural policy (planning discourse). At the same time, farmers and rural living also became the objects of representation in the discourse of Helsingin Sanomat as an antithesis of the efforts to base agricultural policies on scientific planning (rural living discourse).

In the 1990s and 2000s, the future imaginary of agricultural discourse was structured around the conflict between EU agricultural policy and Finnish agriculture. In Helsingin Sanomat this conflict was resolved by interpreting the EU policy reforms in relation to their consequences for domestic farmers in domestic agricultural discourse (national agriculture discourse).

In contrast to the agricultural discourse of the 2000s that was based on a national perspective, the future imaginary of the three climate summits of the same period was dominated by a discourse that highlighted the global consequences of climate change and the need to prevent them (climate discourse).

In relation to the narrative of Finnish socio-political discourses, this study confirms the idea that a discourse highlighting systematic planning was the dominant way of addressing social problems during the 1960s and 1970s. The material of this study does not support the idea that a discourse emphasizing moral issues was dominant in the immediate postwar period. Rather, the future imaginary of this
period was defined by the ideal of economic efficiency in agricultural policy that derived from the political positioning of Helsingin Sanomat.

In relation to the mediatization of politics narrative, this study confirms the idea that political journalism has become increasingly shaped by the logic of journalism rather than by the logics of other discursive practices, such as institutional decision-making. The study shows a clear transformation in news texts from a future imaginary based on reproducing institutional discourses to a future imaginary centered on the narrator’s speech acts.

When it comes to the narrative of a transformation from a modern future towards a late modern future, the results of this study are contradictory. The number of speech acts related to the future in general and the number of speech acts expressing uncertainty did not increase substantially enough to legitimate the claim that the future has become more important and more problematic in late modernity. In a more indirect fashion, this narrative was confirmed in the way the narration of news became more complicated. The layered narration of news articulated the future as an object of constant negotiation.