

## Reporting like there was no pandemic Cultural journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia

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### Abstract

*The 2020 COVID-19 outbreak led to business closures and social activity restrictions. In particular, the cultural sector was severely hit by lockdowns, placing cultural journalism within exceptional circumstances. In this article, we analyse how journalists overcame restrictions by developing a proactive approach to the cultural sphere. As cultural journalism largely leans on the coverage of pre-planned events, exploring the journalistic approaches employed during the pandemic may unveil essential factors in the cultural–journalistic concept of culture and country differences. Our data comprise three consecutive sample weeks from 2020–2021 (weeks 17, 47, and 15) from the culture pages of the largest dailies of Finland, Sweden, and Latvia. Through comparative content analysis, we investigated the journalistic strategies of cultural desks. Using a story entity as the unit of analysis, we examined three aspects of story ideation: reliance on pseudo-events, choice and development of cultural–journalistic genres, and staging and storytelling methods regarding newsroom proactivity. We found differences in cultural concepts, including (dis)connections between art and society, which are frequently discussed in the literature. The results further indicate that proactivity can be a useful tool for developing future cultural journalism.*

### Keywords

*cultural journalism, cultural coverage, proactivity, temporality, COVID-19 pandemic*

## Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported a new type of pneumonia disease originating in China at the end of 2019. This outbreak, which was to become the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, impacted all businesses whose operations had to be restricted or shut down. The cultural sector is amongst those that have been reported to have suffered the most (Jeannotte, 2021), especially because cultural events could not be organised due to significant and constantly changing restrictions on the maximum number of people allowed to attend social gatherings. Many cultural organisations initially restricted their regular activities until they finally ceased them altogether. In the post-World War II history of Western societies, there has not been a time comparable to the global coronavirus outbreak. When the arts and culture sector experienced such severe restrictions for social gatherings, how did this unusual situation affect cultural journalism, a type of general-audience journalism that is strongly dependent on pre-organised events?

“Cultural journalism” is defined as a specialised type of general-interest journalism published in newspapers in separate sections under vignettes referring to arts and culture (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2015). It has been suggested that this distinct form of production can be considered “journalism with a difference” compared to news journalism (Forde, 2003; Harries & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007) and that there exist national differences in the journalistic cultures of this specialised type of general-audience journalism (Kristensen & Riegert, 2017). In particular, the construction of the connection between the field of arts/culture and society shows disparities in different countries (Hellman et al., 2017; Sparre & From, 2017; Janssen et al., 2008). Subjectivity, interpretation, evaluation, and expert-led criticality, instead of validated information, fact-grounded knowledge, immediacy, and sourcing based on external representative experts, have been identified as the preferred norms of cultural journalism (Golin & Cardoso, 2009).

As most analyses discussing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic depart from journalism as *news* or *general* journalism, which are, indeed, connected to the global “disinfodemic” and worsened work conditions to a great extent (Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020; Luengo & García-Marín, 2020; Perreault & Perreault, 2021; Radcliffe, 2020), our understanding of the pandemic’s effects should be complemented with analyses on specialised types of journalism. As these specialised types are epistemically constructed in ways other than the fact-based subfields of news, political, and science and health journalism (see, e.g., Kristensen & Riegert, 2021), they may show deviant directions of development compared with other genres. In subjectively oriented or opinion-based types of journalism, such as cultural journalism (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2015), the most prevalent concern is often not the spread of misinformation with a primary focus on false facts, but rather the missed possibilities of creating added value by relevant meaning-making and sustaining critical distance towards instances that create and promote cultural products and services.

Our point of departure for our qualitative readings is that an exceptional condition, such as an unprecedented global health crisis that shut down several sectors of society (not only the cultural sector), could potentially expose the essential characteristics of cultural journalism that have been richly discussed in previous academic research as changing, shifting paradigms or in crisis (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012; Sarrimo, 2017; Widholm et al., 2019). However, we are not interested in the choices of topics or the different forms of arts/culture mediated in coverage in terms of time and journalistic action. Instead, we place *proactivity* at the centre, which we understand as a journalistic attitude that marks the relationship of the newsroom to news events or “critical incidents” in the world that are supposed to be reported.

Employing content analysis, we investigated coverage under the COVID-19 pandemic in three countries with geographical proximity to one another: Finland, Sweden, and Latvia. In particular, we performed a qualitative analysis of the newspaper content in these countries to examine how cultural journalists shaped the pandemic imaginaries in their specific areas of coverage. To begin, we will discuss proactivity as a journalism strategy in general, and its application to cultural journalism in newspapers in particular. This is followed by a description of the data and methodology and, finally, by the empirical analysis.

## Proactivity and cultural journalism

“Proactivity” is the aspiration to act with foresight, as well as engagement, in the present moment to prepare oneself for the future. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, proactivity refers to a person or policy “controlling a situation by making things happen rather than waiting for things to happen and then reacting to them” (OED, 2023). Proactive responses are typically described as a characteristic of organisational behaviour (Grant & Ashford, 2008) that are often celebrated in strategic organisational planning and management, such as in crisis communication (Kash & Darling, 1998) and PR and reputation management (Cwiak, 2014), where they are regarded as drivers for successful performances in turbulent organisational environments. Even in the cultural sector, proactivity has been observed as a success factor for organisations (see, e.g., Pforr & Hosie, 2008; Hayes & Patton, 2010). However, proactivity is premised on the journalistic notion in which reacting to external occurrences in reality is a core act.

In the discourse of journalism studies, proactivity is often connected to how we view the future: Journalists anticipate how processes evolve and outline future directions in their stories and thinking (Zelizer, 2013, 2017). Therefore, proactivity refers to the crucial component of journalism’s relationship to time, something that scholars have criticised journalism studies for having long taken for granted (Carlson & Lewis, 2019; Bødker & Sonnevend, 2014; Craig, 2016). The social construction of time, in particular, marks a central difference in cultural journalism in comparison to news journalism, as the former

is considered slower, more timeless, and even historic in terms of its conception of temporality (Wilson, 2018; Hermann, 2016; Kõresaar & Harro-Loit, 2010).

In this context, we refer to proactivity as an attitude or approach in newsgathering wherein journalists approach occurrences and raise questions about the realities reported on their own initiatives. In this respect, it typically dovetails with subjectivity and interpretative approaches and is regarded as the opposite of, or an alternative to, objective or neutral reporting (Bowman, 2006). In organisational communication, especially crisis communication, proactivity is considered a central concept in describing organisations' ability to provide information prior to a crisis or disclose it as early as possible (see, e.g., Hornmoen & Backholm, 2018). In journalism, proactivity is also considered a method of countering and combatting spin, along with all promotional efforts from intermediaries trying to lobby for their own sake (Simpson, 2005).

In journalistic practice, we define proactivity as an intention to develop story ideas in a way that provides added value to the story through meaning-making and as an ability to act before something happens in the outside world, or regardless of it. A non-proactive approach implies reflecting on global occurrences by simply reproducing the event in text: telling the audience what has happened instead of taking the reflections further by interpretation, judgement, questioning, and so on. Certainly, there are no clear boundaries between "passive" and "active" newsmaking, and even reactive approaches require interpretation and contextualisation. Thus, proactivity is seen as a more general act in relation to global occurrences in terms of time and meaning. Reactive newsmaking is often based on a press release and realised in the form of a piece of news; in culture, this piece of news typically describes the release of a new product, a decision that leads to the production of new art or a prize awarded to a person or an organisation. Hence, the specifics of cultural journalism lead to a distinct interdependence between cultural journalism and its sources and to journalistic practices that can be identified as "churnalism" (Davies, 2008; Kristensen, 2018). Golin and Cardoso (2009, p. 70) discussed news values in the context of Brazilian cultural journalism and labelled cultural-journalistic as "predictable journalism".

Proactivity indicates an active attitude in the newsroom towards the external environment, which, concretely, means developing one's own ideas, identifying and discovering emerging phenomena that are not widely known or discussed previously, and addressing something that has not been communicated to the newsrooms by promoters. Whilst a reaction, as a journalistic act, is often standardised and based on a routine and, thus, is time-effective, proactivity requires more resources in terms of time and human effort. However, proactivity is typically regarded as a sign of ambitious and preferable journalism—a marker of good professional conduct and product related to efforts towards cultural journalism journalistification (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012; Sarrimo, 2017). In this case, cultural departments have undergone managerial development processes with the intent to professionalise them through content and format development and news-driven leadership.

Traditionally, cultural reporting has been highly dependent on the annual cycle of cultural events organised by cultural institutions. Cultural journalism does not essentially account for reactions to unprecedented news events, such as emergencies, but is based on reactions to events planned by others—typically cultural organisations offering art to cultural publics. These fabricated events do not come as a surprise to anyone, but they are carefully designed and promoted. Unlike spontaneous news events, these events are often referred to using Boorstin's concept of "pseudo-events" (1961/1977). Although such events occur in all types of journalism, they are especially salient in cultural journalism, where art does not "happen" but is always initiated and mediated by stakeholders in the chain of cultural mediation (Jaakkola, 2015). Examples of pseudo-events include publishers' book releases related to seasonal book catalogues, concerts, events based on social gatherings, and scene art and exhibition calendars, amongst others. Typically, the release events of cultural products, such as release occasions, theatre, dance, vernissages, and film and musical premieres, serve as the starting points for cultural–journalistic stories, thereby motivating, grounding, and highlighting the topicality of the themes therein. Based on the fact that a new piece of art has been released in the cultural market (or, in more democratic terms, in the "cultural public sphere"), journalists can develop their approaches further. That they do not have to remain at a descriptive level in simply informing audiences about the release of a new product, but elaborate on the subject further, highlights the function of elaborated proactivity, which adds value to the release event. Cultural consumers may not receive the same kind of meaning-making process anywhere else.

The inclusion of the elements of proactivity is part of the cultural (inter)mediation process that constitutes cultural journalism (Jaakkola, 2022b). Reactive reporting may conceive of the field of culture as a mere production of cultural goods for consumption, whilst proactivity involves a broader function of being a system of values, norms, traditions, and symbols. Therefore, even if proactivity stands out as a preferred normative ideal or a marker for quality in cultural–journalistic practice, it is worth noting that the lack of it should not be interpreted as an assessment of low-quality or unambitious journalism or a sign of stagnation in cultural journalism. As the outcome of an article is a collection of several co-occurring factors, such as the sources' communication activities and availability, the existing resources at the cultural desk, and the journalist's interests and preferences, amongst others, opting out of proactivity does not always directly mean that a journalistic performance has failed.

### **Proactivity as a cultural journalistic strategy**

Cultural journalism covers different genres—from preannouncements of events to political debates and from investigative reporting to cultural criticism; nevertheless, the main genres are still news and reviews, representing two epistemic paradigms respectively called the "journalistic" and the "aesthetic" by Jaakkola (2015; see also Hellman & Jaak-

kola, 2012). The news-led journalistic paradigm is based on the epistemology of news and consists of short notices, previews, news feature articles, interviews, personal portraits, and the like, based on journalistic sourcing. The review-led aesthetic paradigm implies a primarily retrospective approach to cultural events and is created based on the meritocratic concept of the author's expert knowledge.

The concept of proactivity has not been previously applied to cultural journalism in a systematic and consistent manner, but the relationship to the object of coverage—the art world or the cultural sphere—has been described using related terms, such as “pseudo-events” (Kristensen & From, 2011) and “predictability” (Golin & Cardoso, 2009). The different orientations in terms of immediacy are also imminent in dual-paradigm theory (Jaakkola, 2015). Hence, based on our understanding of cultural journalists, particularly the ethnographic work conducted in the culture department of the largest newspaper in the geographical area of study (Jaakkola, 2015), at least two types of proactivity can be distinguished in connection to the duality of cultural journalism: first, in terms of time (temporal proactivity), as in the news paradigm, and second, in terms of meaning-making (hermeneutic proactivity), as in the aesthetic paradigm. *Temporal proactivity* refers to the relationship between the journalistic act of publication and the event that is reported on. The act of publication may occur regardless of an event, before an event, during an event, or after an event. *Hermeneutic proactivity* refers to the journalistic elaboration of the meaning allotted to an event occurrence. Basically, hermeneutic proactivity can be anticipatory (preceding an incident), descriptive (re-giving an incident), analytic-interpretative (analysing and interpreting an incident instead of just describing it), or evaluative (assessing an incident).

Furthermore, events that constitute the objects and motivations of coverage can be divided into two types: real-world events prevalent in general news journalism, such as in political or local coverage, and cultural events or pseudo-events characteristic of cultural coverage. *Real-world events* or *natural events*, typically understood as news events, occur in the reality being monitored by journalism as they take place; most of these occurrences are not pre-claimed, anticipated, or under control of any instances, unlike pseudo-events, which are produced or made to happen by an organisation or agent. The unpredictability of natural events makes them news; they may be deviant, surprising, and abrupt, thus increasing their news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2016). Non-natural events, such as the fabricated, pre-planned and arranged events of book launches, pre-screenings, and cultural press conferences or info meetings, may have news value to individuals when they hear about them for the first time, such as the announcement of a concert or theatre catalogue. However, such news value is essentially created by cultural journalism through hermeneutic work. In the case of the current pandemic, cultural events filtered the natural events by somehow reacting to the pandemic at the same time that the real-world events held down the arrangement of pseudo-events. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how real-world events and non-natural events could be tightly interconnected, which also applies to both types of proactivity.



For cultural journalism, the primary objects of coverage are non-natural events, whilst real-world events are covered only from a limited perspective, motivated by the work differentiation between newspaper beats. The concepts of timely and hermeneutic proactivity are described in Figure 1. For temporal proactivity, cultural journalism can cover pseudo-events with the help of previewing (2), synchronous coverage (3), or post-coverage (4, 5). In addition, coverage can be created regardless of the pseudo-event (1). In the same way, natural events can also be anticipated or reported during or after the event, but previewing occurs with less precision and must be based on forecasting rather than pre-knowledge about the event’s boundaries. For example, reporting on an upcoming festival in the city departs from a fixed date and an organisation that can inform journalists about how it expects things to be. In comparison, it is much more difficult—and maybe even irrelevant—to report on what will happen on the streets during the festival. Thus, cultural journalism, with its salient interest in and focus on pseudo-events, has a much more precise foresight in reporting than, for example, political or general news journalism.

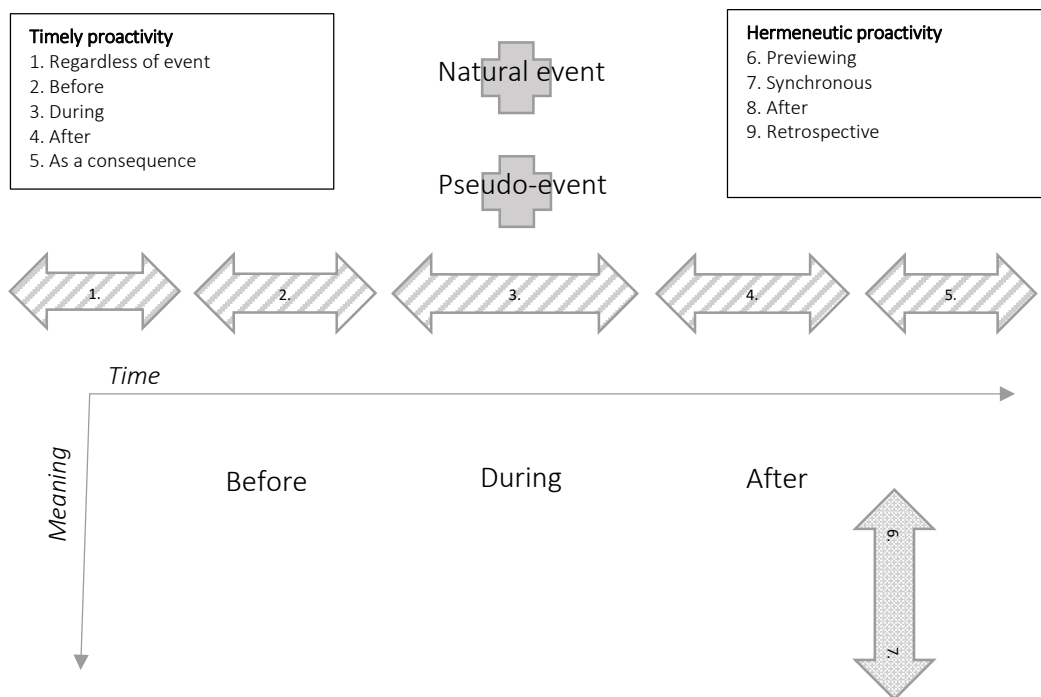


Figure 1. Two types of cultural-journalistic proactivity: timely and hermeneutic.]

Hermeneutic proactivity, which means the creation of depth in meaning, varies from mirroring reality (6) to a subjective approach that can, for example, be a valuation of occurrences (7). The mirroring strategy is similar to reconstructing reality in that it remains as objectivist, monitorial, and neutral as possible. The more subjective ways of meaning-

creation imply analysis, interpretation, and evaluation of occurrences, taking authors into a more interventionist position with their own voices. Thus, the depth of meaning-making presupposes the elaboration of an idea and approach into something that takes distance from reality (as in natural events) or the original cultural products discussed (as in pseudo-events), gradually becoming a creation of the author's own.

Whilst journalistic roles have been observed to vary according to their understandings of journalistic positioning at large (Hanitzsch et al., 2019), cultural journalists strongly follow either aesthetic or hermeneutic logic (Hovden & Kristensen, 2021). For cultural journalists, the sphere of meaning-making is part of their professional undertakings. The outcome of hermeneutic proactivity usually stands for the unique substance a cultural desk provides, distinguishing them from other newspapers' and news agencies' cultural offerings; for example, cultural editors tend to appreciate both newsmaking and evaluation of culture through their ability to create a unique added value for the culture department through the human efforts of subjective meaning-making (Jaakkola, 2015). In this way, the hermeneutic form of proactivity particularly appears as a subjective, human effort to create original work in the journalistic context. The originality that emerges from creative processes adds an added value of meaning to the objects that are being reported on.

Hermeneutic proactive work can be related to elaborating value on an existing event (or an object, phenomenon, process, etc.). This is the standard case where cultural journalists react to (pre-announced) cultural products and happenings, such as book launches, exhibitions, concerts, festivals, and the like, and write about them in various ways, ranging from mere mirroring to interpreting and valuating these events. In this case, such events have been communicated to cultural journalists in book catalogues, press releases and meetings, or through (typically major established) institutions, such as publishers and book agencies, museums, concert halls, and libraries, which means cultural journalists do not have to discover the existence of these events by themselves. However, hermeneutic proactive work can also mean discovering a new event that is "out there" but has not yet been advocated to the cultural desk by anyone. Finally, it can also mean constructing an event of one's own, as in cases where a cultural journalist or critic identifies a new phenomenon that has not been primarily initiated by the producers of pseudo-events.

In the related academic literature, cultural journalism has been especially criticised for its low accomplishment in both forms of proactivity. A prevalent claim is that cultural journalists are unable to recognise what is news and react to it immediately (Wilson, 2018), thus developing no temporal proactivity. Cultural journalism has also been observed to frequently relapse to "churnalism", that is, recycling materials from cultural organisations' press releases and other resources created for the sake of communication and increased visibility, without a significant effort to show originality from the journalist (Kristensen, 2018), thus showing a lack of hermeneutic proactivity.

Amongst the relationships shown in Figure 1, in this study, we focus on the relationship between cultural reporting and the COVID-19 pandemic as a natural event. We



examine how natural events related to the pandemic—partly as a context for occurrences in the cultural public sphere—possibly affected cultural coverage as a topic and the reason for topic development in the form of proactivity, inducing cultural journalists to adjust their choices of topics and angles. It can be presumed that the natural “macro-event” of the pandemic is filtered through the cultural sphere, resulting in non-natural, cultural, and pseudo-events reflecting upon the prevailing conditions.

## Study design

### *Research questions*

By examining the culture pages in the leading national dailies in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia, we endeavour to determine how cultural journalism enacted proactivity in their stories during the COVID-19 pandemic. We are interested in determining the extent to which cultural journalists merely reflected on the prevailing situation in the cultural sector and in what ways they took the initiative in elaborating their own questions or even developing new formats to report about arts and culture during this time.

Thus, our research questions read as follows: How were the cultural pages of daily newspapers in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia affected by the COVID-19 pandemic? In particular, how did proactivity manifest in the cultural content during the early pandemic period or the first year of the global COVID-19 crisis, from 2020 to 2021?

We intend to practice sensitivity to the differences in journalistic approaches amongst the leading dailies of these countries as we trace both the similarities and differences in their coverages, with a focus on a qualitative analysis of proactivity.

### *Data and methodology*

The content analysis on the proactive orientation in pandemic cultural reporting focuses on three countries: two Nordic countries with perceived differences in their cultural journalistic approaches (Kristensen & Riegert, 2017) and a Baltic country with a strong cultural connection to the Nordics. Finland and Sweden belong to the democratist corporatist media systems, or journalism cultures (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). In comparison, the Latvian media system has been described as typical for Central and Eastern European countries in the late phase of transition, as a hybrid liberal media system (Dobek-Ostrowska, 2019), with some researchers observing its tendency to show close proximity to Nordic media systems (Castro Herrero et al., 2017). Although these countries are adjacent to one another, they differ in their cultural conditions. Finland has a more aesthetically limited cultural concept and market-oriented media system, whilst Swedish cultural journalism typically incorporates political and societal debates into the discussions on cultural pages (Kristensen & Riegert, 2017). Latvia faces more challenges in media literacy and harmful speech policy implementation than other Baltic countries, such as Estonia and Lithuania, yet it shares many media landscape indicators related to the media market, media

independence, and right of access to information with Finland (EUI, 2022). Nevertheless, cultural journalism in Latvia has not been extensively studied, with existing research and historical insights showing an insufficient diversity of views and positions, as well as a rather passive approach by journalists and editors (Lasmane & Radzobe, 2018, p. 411).

For the content analysis with both quantitative and qualitative components (Jaakkola, 2022a), we chose the major newspapers from each country. In Finland, the largest Finnish-speaking daily with the most established culture department is *Helsingin Sanomat*, published in the capital, Helsinki, and owned by the Sanoma media company. The print paper had about 626,000 readers in 2020 (KMT, 2020). In Sweden, as of 2016, the largest newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, was no longer available in the public database PressReader, so the second biggest newspaper, *Svenska Dagbladet*, was chosen. Owned by Schibstedt, *Svenska Dagbladet* is published in capital, Stockholm, with 347,000 readers of the print version as of 2020 (Orvesto, 2021). In Latvia, the largest daily, with 37,000 readers (Kantar, 2020), is *Latvijas Avīze*, published in the capital, Riga, and owned by Latvijas Mediji.

We created a sample consisting of three consecutive sample weeks, as follows:

- Week 17 of 2020 (20–26 April 2020)
- Week 47 of 2020 (16–22 November 2020)
- Week 15 of 2021 (12–18 April 2021)

These weeks represent different points in the sequence of events during the pandemic, during which societies adopted several measures to restrict activities. These measures included workplace and school closures, travel bans, restrictions on social gatherings, recommendations to practise social distancing and wear masks, and, above all, cancellation of public events, which made the practice of arts and culture immensely difficult. In Latvia, all public gatherings exceeding 200 people (and later on, 50 people) were forbidden beginning 12 March 2020, followed by stronger restrictions at the end of the month. Whilst the lockdown period in the Nordics was introduced in March 2020, the first consequences of the shutdown of society only became perceivable towards the end of April 2020, when all three countries required unconditional cancellations of public events (Ritchie et al., 2021). By April 2021, cancellations were still a reality in these countries, but assessments of the pandemic, which had now continued for more than a year, started to emerge. In week 17, Finland was one of the few countries in the world with restrictions on more than 1,000 people, whilst Sweden and Latvia only imposed restrictions on gatherings under 100 people. In week 47, Finland and Sweden restricted gatherings of up to 100 people, whilst Latvia implemented a stricter policy, allowing gatherings of only up to 10 people. In week 15, there was a restriction on gatherings of up to 10 people in the countries (Ritchie et al., 2021). However, the reduced restrictions did not directly affect the arrangement of cultural events; hence, events were typically planned within a longer period of time or in a revised format, and, once cancelled, were not suddenly re-activated.

Our unit of analysis is a thematic unit that we call a “topic entity”. This is a collection of text items showing attention to a certain topic. Typically, an article covers one topic, but sometimes, the coverage of a single news event consists of a number of single textual pieces. For example, a personal interview is often complemented with a fact file or a news article, as facts must be distinguished from the author’s opinions; it may also be accompanied by a shorter text that provides a subjective account of the news event. Topic entities are typically ideated and created or, at least in their production, are led by one person (the main journalist, sub-editor, or similar) who coordinates them and relates the coverage of the topic entities to one overall theme, topic, or primary event. The variable was decided based on the main story in the topic entity, so one topic entity could involve components that also represented other types of proactivity but were subordinated to the main story’s orientation, which was the primary interest of the study. We decided to focus on the main articles because it had sometimes been unnecessary to categorise fact files, comment boxes, listings, and other “side-offs” to the main article.

The data for Finland and Sweden were coded by one person with strong language proficiency in Finnish and Swedish (author 1), whilst the Latvian data were coded by a native Latvian speaker (author 2). Both authors have previous professional experience in cultural journalism and have also studied the field previously. The formation of categories was conducted through a highly coordinated dialogue between the coders going through the data. The results revealed a total of 462 topic entities, including 167, 191, and 462 topic entities from Finland, Sweden and Latvia, respectively.

Using a topic entity as a unit of analysis, we observed each topic entity’s relation to the pandemic as a world occurrence. First, we observed a distinction between “pandemic-neutral” and “pandemic-affected” approaches. The pandemic-neutral stories were articles that did not mention the pandemic but were published regardless. Second, we focused on the articles showing a pandemic connection and developed three categories describing the topic entity’s relation to the pandemic. These categories range from mirroring to active idea development:

1. Neutral reporting: not COVID-19-related (COVID-19-neutral)
2. Reactive reporting on COVID-related topics: describing events caused/affected by COVID-19
3. Active reporting on COVID-related topics: analyses of the pandemic with a developed angling or approach
4. Proactive: new COVID-19-related formats or ideas developed further from natural events caused/affected by COVID-19

“Neutral reporting” (1) describes coverage that has no observable connection to the pandemic; it may be a review of a book that had been published regardless of the world situation. “Reactive reporting” refers to coverage describing pandemic-related events in realities beyond the newsroom, such as the death of a celebrity because of COVID-19.

“Active reporting” is when journalists cover cultural issues by explicitly analysing the pandemic, such as writing an essay on how reading habits have changed during and because of it. Finally, “proactive reporting” refers to the kind of coverage that no longer deals with the pandemic but rather further development, such as a newsroom initiative to launch a “digital book club” to engage readers during the pandemic.

In the process of coding the topic entities, we registered relevant articles for further qualitative analysis. These were the topic entities placed under categories 3 and 4, which are considered signs of cultural–journalistic proactivity in terms of reporting on the pandemic. Thus, our qualitative analysis focused on the proactive dimensions in cultural–journalistic thinking, tracing cases that count as signs of interventionism instead of a passive recording of events.

### **Proactive responses to the pandemic**

The overall visual impression when browsing through the Finnish culture pages during the pandemic was that culture lived a life of its own. Whilst the news sections showed people in photos with face masks, that was not the case on the culture pages. This difference might be attributed to the fact that a great deal of cultural materials showing persons consisted of press materials or staged photos related to personal interviews, whilst the most frequent photo materials used in news sections were news event materials that were less pre-planned, staged, and composed. The focus in news photos was not on individuals, like how it was on culture pages where artists, cultural organisation representatives and prize winners were interviewed as persons of special importance. In Swedish and Latvian newspapers, it seemed that masks were used less in press photos in general, as the restrictions were different from those imposed in Finland.

The results describing the journalistic approach of proactivity as defined and described above are presented in Figure 2, which shows the choices of approaches in topic entities in Finland, Sweden, and Latvia. In these countries, the proactive approach was represented in less than 10 pct. Of all articles (3 pct. in Finnish, 8 pct. in Swedish, and 5 pct. in all Latvian content analysed, as shown in Figure 2). Furthermore, Figure 2 shows that the major approach to events being reported is a neutral one; more than half of the stories represent an approach that is more or less independent of the happenings and arrangements in the outside world. In Finland, Sweden, and Latvia, 81 pct., 73 pct., and 69 pct. Of the topic entities were classified as neutral, respectively. Articles representing such a pandemic-neutral approach consisted mostly of news on cultural events (e.g., reports on prize winners and new releases), reviews, personal portraits, and essays centred on aesthetic matters.

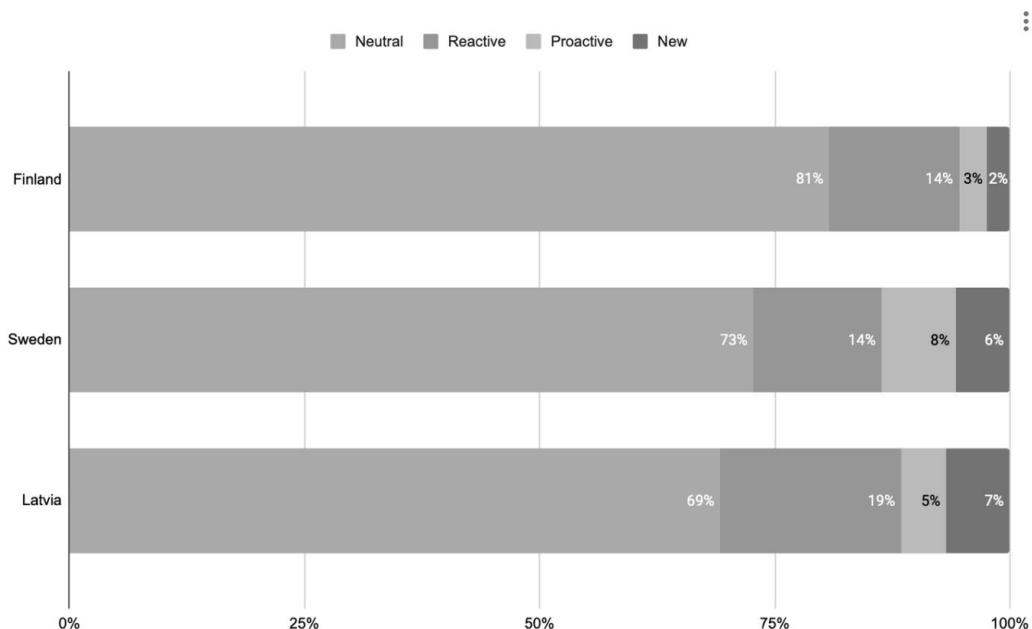


Figure 2. Types of proactivity in Finnish (N=167), Swedish (N=191) and Latvian (N=104) topic entities.

One initial finding when tracing proactivity in the articles is that the framework of proactivity described here is largely connected to genres. News and reviews, the two major genre categories of cultural journalism (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2015), have different foundations in terms of proactivity; whilst the news articles are more oriented towards temporal proactivity, the reviews, as a retrospective way of content creation and practice, lean on hermeneutic proactivity. News and review-making also seem to require different kinds of proactivity elaboration, with news being more connected to natural events and reviews being attached to pseudo-events.

Reviews were the most prevalent type of articles least affected by the COVID-19 development and were placed under the “COVID-19-neutral” category. Reviews of new cultural products released on the market, such as books, music albums, films, television programmes, and games, could be written and published regardless of restrictions. Compared with others, performance art experienced more disruptions due to the COVID-19 development; hence, reviews on theatre and dance performances, live concerts, and film premieres were omitted. Gradually, as cultural institutions started developing alternative ways to make art accessible, reviews could be written on live-streamed concerts and online theatre productions. Although the Finnish National Theatre started producing audio plays, there was only a short piece of news about that in the sample instead of reviews. Even if the innovative Internet-based forms of delivering cultural products were permanently referred to in the content, there was basically no in-depth analyses or discussions in the reviews of the challenges they created for artists, for example, in live-streamed

concerts. It seemed that, despite the many cancellations, the review show needed to go on. Cultural journalists partly compensated for the lack of cultural events to be reviewed by turning to digital media and television programmes, especially streaming services, such as Netflix and HBO. For example, *Svenska Dagbladet* employed the format “best in TV” to specifically address television output. In *Latvijas Avīze*, a discussion of reading habits and books in the context of the lockdown was initiated, including an interview with a Lithuanian researcher on digital book-reading habits.

Meanwhile, the genre of personal interviews with artists who had released something new was relatively unaffected by the pandemic. Even if they could have used a COVID-19 angle, the topics discussed in many such interviews were often strictly focused on the ideas presented in an artist’s production. In the few interviews conducted with management representatives of cultural organisations, for example, in the interview with Jūta Pīrāga—a representative of the “Latvian Literature” platform in *Latvijas Avīze*—on the effects of COVID-19, possible solutions were included in the frame introduced by cultural journalists.

In Latvia, a reactive mindset was found more often than in the two Nordic countries. Reactive approaches were mostly made up of news content. In general, the cultural news mainly discussed the effects of COVID-19 on cultural events: festivals becoming virtual, cancelled, or postponed. There were also news events caused by the coronavirus, for example, an episode of the television programme series *Dancing with the Stars* was cancelled because a person in the production group caught COVID-19 (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 21 November 2020). News also addressed how individual celebrities, such as Marianne Faithfull, tested positive for the coronavirus, or how media personalities, such as Dolly Parton, were engaged in social work to combat the health crisis. In these cases, the coronavirus clearly made the news.

It can be observed that because of the omission of public onsite cultural events, the newsworthiness of journalistic content became more bound to time than place, so journalists had to flexibly configure newsworthy ideas that were not dependent on onsite dimensions. Time played a role in finding people who would otherwise have attended festivals and similar events for exposure. Given the lack of concerts and similar topicality-makers, interviews were conducted based on anniversaries, such as a personal interview based on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the theatre festival Baltic Circle in Helsinki; the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Daile, one of the most popular theatres in Latvia; a personal interview with the fiction author Johanna Sinisalo, based on her 20 years of experience as a published author; or an essay based on a prize winner’s experiences when a year had passed. Cultural journalists also increasingly turned to social media to find topics for coverage and described digital phenomena perhaps more carefully than usual. As already mentioned, the emphasis on coverage was directed towards television programmes and films on streaming platforms. Many stories covered the creation of national and international choir efforts—videos of individual performances spliced together or live events created



online—that proliferated on the Internet. In Finland, several topic entities reported on events of design auctions, which were not typical topics in the cultural concept underlying the conventional practices of cultural journalism.

Turning to digital and social media for stories increased the international emphasis of coverage. For example, stories on virtual tours of the world's museums and international media debates were common. *Helsingin Sanomat* reported on Gallimard, the French book publisher that had warned people against submitting manuscripts—a pursuit that significantly increased during the pandemic (“Don't send us any manuscripts!”, 18 April 2021). It also ran a story on American actress Jamie Lee Curtis's reaction on social media, as she asked who the Finnish comedian Ismo Leikola was, celebrating it as a manifestation of Leikola's increased international reputation.

Increased attention to online life also implied increased metacoverage, especially for *Helsingin Sanomat*, which often referred to activities initiated and produced by the media organisation itself. The online initiatives introduced by the newspaper included video presentations, in which stories in the print papers included references and guides to virtual experiences available to the public online. The Finnish daily frequently promoted its own digital service: an online reading circle and a mobile app for Finnish-language fiction books launched pre-pandemic in 2014.

## Differences in cultural concepts

Amongst the articles included in the Finnish sample weeks, no essay discussed the coronavirus situation. In the Latvian sample, we identified a handful of columns written by two well-known writers who provided reflections on the pandemic as a shock, change, or even an opportunity; other than that, the discussions were restricted. Similarly, in the Swedish sample weeks, there were several such examples (see the next section).

Notably, similar to the Swedish culture section, the *local* news desk in *Helsingin Sanomat* had a special “coronavirus” vignette. Under this label, persons and phenomena, including emotions, reactions, and consequences, were presented, instead of discussing them in the culture section. For example, stories included “The opening of the training outlet was a relief to those who are doing sports” (25 April 2020), “In Espoo, people are sharing literature on the streets” (25 April 2020), “The pandemic time makes it more difficult to master eating disorders” (16 November 2020), and “The Finns are giving donations in the midst of a crisis” (14 April 2021). Similar stories could be found on the cultural pages in *Svenska Dagbladet*, such as “We are longing for normality” (19 November 2020). One can conclude that the lack of cultural articles explicitly discussing the pandemic is a sign of cultural journalism not being critical of the local cultural life and the crisis caused by the pandemic, but rather affirmative or even ignorant in terms of the lockdown. However, instead of adopting such an interpretation, we can see this as a structural condition that boils down to differences in the concepts of culture. The cultural concept in Finnish and

Latvian newspapers seems to be more restricted to aesthetics, whilst the Swedish concept entails discussions and debates on societal, non-aesthetic issues. This is because of the practice in Finnish and Latvian journalism of placing content with non-aesthetic substance elsewhere in the newspaper compared to Sweden, in which a tighter connection is established between art and society.

In all three sample weeks, there were discussions in *Svenska Dagbladet* on the values related to the global crisis. For example, it published articles under the vignette “Coronavirus in everyday life”, where a medical doctor reflected upon his experiences during the pandemic in an article entitled “After intensive care, there are many who can hardly move” (25 April 2020). *Svenska Dagbladet* also published several essays written in a feuilletonistic style on how the arts can help us cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic or how cultures and identities are affected by exceptional times. For example, in the essay “Through arts, we can exercise in dwelling in insecurity” (20 November 2020), different strategies for coping every day, based on fiction literature, were sought. The two-page essay “If I don’t work, I don’t exist at all” (20 November 2020) was an autoreflective approach to the topic of working remotely at home and how it affected individuals’ professional identities. Various angles on the topic during the pandemic were also sought, as in the essay “The boy’s book’s adventure that summarises 2020” (21 November 2021), where the essayist argued that we should return to the science fiction writer Jules Verne to understand ongoing global crises, such as the pandemic, extinction of species, or climate change.

As for Finland, it seemed that the experiential and emotional dimensions of the pandemic were discussed to a great extent in departments *other* than culture, such as in the general news section and in feature articles of local and international coverage. This reflects upon the work differentiation structures that lead to internal division in the newsroom, where culture focuses on the cultural offerings of art organisations, and people’s lifeworlds are covered by the local news desk. The choice of authors was another crucial question in this case. In the Swedish sample, several writers were not professional journalists, but could be more appropriately categorised as intellectuals. In Latvia, the common practice was to involve freelance columnists, who were also professional writers (or artists). Meanwhile, the Finnish coverage was mostly written by journalists and was thus strictly directed by a news approach. Journalists often follow the established and standardised formats of the newspaper, whilst freelance intellectuals could extend the ways in which they addressed certain questions.

## Discussion

Given the lack of a seasonal cycle of onsite events or different public events that normally constitute the object of cultural journalistic reporting, it was assumed that cultural journalists might have been forced to conduct more journalist-centred and proactive work

with ideas of their own during the pandemic, resulting in increasing debate and coverage of societal aspects of culture throughout the year. However, this was not fully the case in all the countries studied. Up to 80 pct. Of the content in all three dailies studied in this article not only provided what we defined as a pandemic-proactive approach but also seemed to not have been significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The analysis mainly exposed a difference between the Finnish and Swedish approaches, in which the former is more restricted to aesthetics and delimits the field of arts, different from “society”, which is left to other departments. Meanwhile, the latter negotiates between arts and societal issues. In other words, the Finnish sample included cases of temporal proactivity; the Latvian approach, with its retrospective attitude, tended towards hermeneutic proactivity; and the Swedish tradition, with its wide definition of the field of reference, provided a relatively higher level of (hermeneutic) proactivity. This finding, based on a comparative analysis of daily newspapers from these countries, can be aligned with previous research that found traces of these differences embedded in more general journalistic cultures (see Hanitzsch et al., 2019). Such a finding implies that even neighbouring countries, or those with geocultural proximity, may have diverging historical traditions regarding culture, thereby affecting their mediation of contemporary arts and culture.

During the pandemic, different forms of art were exposed to various challenges and had to undergo different conditions for public visibility and accessibility. Whilst products in the form of material artefacts (e.g., books) and those that could be released without a live audience (e.g., music recordings, television programmes, games, and films) continued to thrive, art forms dependent on a live audience and ephemeral in nature needed to seek new ways, first, to come into being and reach their audience, and, second, to be covered by the media.

A direct comparison amongst pre-, during and post-pandemic coverages could highlight the potential changes in reporting. However, due to limited resources, such an extensive measure of data collection and coding was not possible within this study. Nevertheless, previous research that focused on changes in cultural journalism (Hellman & Jaakkola, 2012; Sarrimo, 2017; Heikkilä et al., 2018; Widholm et al., 2019) had already shown instability and direct (inter)dependency on sources (Kristensen, 2018) and the rather liquid structure of reporting practices and standards (Jaakkola et al., 2016). Therefore, other interesting questions for further research would involve the other pole of content production collaboration, namely, the cultural organisations’ communication activities. Did cultural organisations, such as museums, concert providers, theatres, and literary agencies that act as sources for cultural journalism provide press releases or hints for coverage? Did reviewers see the pandemic as an opportunity for increased coverage and become more active, or even proactive, in ideation, developing ready-made journalistic ideas for the cultural desks? Assessments based on the content analysis in the current study suggest two alternatives: first, they did not remarkably adjust their communication

and PR strategies, or did so, but only very occasionally; and second, their altered output was not largely received by the cultural desks.

This analysis indicates that the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic did not render cultural journalism a distinctly proactive orientation; instead, it covered the pandemic through minor temporal and hermeneutic adjustments. In other words, cultural journalism maintained a dispassionate distance from real-world events, maintaining its ritual structure of interviewing celebrities and reviewing books and other cultural products that were released despite the lockdowns. On the one hand, temporal proactivity was manifested in mostly reactive news reporting the deaths of cultural celebrities and cancellations of shows and displays. On the other hand, hermeneutic proactivity was mostly nurtured on Swedish and Latvian culture pages, where essays discussed pandemic-inflicted cultural behaviours and patterns. Reviews changed their objects from concerts and exhibitions in the physical space to records and online events, and from classical cultural practices and artefacts to more popular practices and artefacts, such as television series and games that were easily accessible at home. Generally speaking, the cultural change is slow, the structure is constant, and the development of content remains relatively stable across time (Heikkilä et al., 2018; Widholm et al., 2019; Jaakkola, 2015). Indeed, format development in newsrooms is undertaken within longer periods of time and not necessarily in a situation of crisis wherein journalists deal with information overload. However, over a longer period of time, it is feasible that the pandemic may have pushed cultural journalism towards the popularisation of content (Heikkilä et al., 2018; Jaakkola, 2015)—something that is beyond the scope of this study.

Being able to put forward new cultural arguments and ignite cultural debates based on the proactive mindset of the cultural journalist is typically perceived as a preferred signature feature of culture departments (see, e.g., Jaakkola, 2015). Proactivity could be considered a tool for developing signature practices for cultural journalism. In the presence of increased competition in the media market, media houses seek unique content to stand out from their competitors. In times of a rich supply of cultural events, the media-specific distinction is often constructed by in-house curation (selections) and meaning-making (creating value by showing where “good taste” or quality can be found or initiating cultural narratives). Consciously developing proactivity strategies aimed at increasing the symbolic value of a cultural event or product can be a competitive asset for the culture desk, as it has always been.

## Conclusions

This article examined proactivity as a central dimension of cultural journalism and as a core concept for understanding cultural journalism’s mediated relationship to the world, especially at a time when the cultural domain was radically downsized by the shutdown of cultural events. The COVID-19 pandemic constituted less of a *topic* for cultural journal-

ists in the three countries studied, but the *effects* and *consequences* of the pandemic were observed and reported. This confirmed the indirect relationship to the outside world, but also gave rise to the question of the potential of proactive approaches as a bridge between cultural journalism and the complex reality it reports on. Timely and hermeneutic proactivity can be used for the value creation of events, for example, by advancing in-depth cultural reflections on the pandemic itself and the related changes in people's cultural practices and artists' works.

We anticipated that exceptional times might reveal important dimensions in the established structures of reporting; thus, we were able to observe how the national differences in the concepts of culture underlying newsrooms generated slightly different outcomes. The general leaning towards pseudo-events implies lower temporal proactivity compared with hermeneutic proactivity, which lies at the heart of cultural–journalistic work. However, more comparative analyses are needed to generate knowledge of journalistic approaches nurtured by cultural journalists around the world.

Regardless of the pandemic conditions, proactivity continues to play an important role in cultural–journalistic activities, as outlined in this article. Therefore, it would be advisable to further study how proactivity works and affects journalistic decisions and the development of ideas at cultural desks around the world. It also remains to be studied how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the coverage dedicated to different cultural forms or genres, the employment of journalistic genres, and the development of new formats, all of which call for a longitudinal analysis across a longer timeframe.

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