

# The Finnish Weekly: A Trusted Neighbor

By Kaarle Nordenstreng

"The backwoods of Europe are called Finland." This statement reflects the dominate view of the young intellectuals in Finland; they argue for more cultural stimulation, more international participation. With this perspective in mind it is quite encouraging for a nationally frustrated Finn to visit the Great Nation—the United States—and notice that much of life is highly similar in these two countries.

This is especially true as to the profile of the weekly press: the faces and problems of weeklies in U.S. seem to be very much similar to those in Finland, a Scandinavian country which has the size of California and the population of Missouri (4, 5 millions).

An American weekly editor and his Finnish colleague would be fairly compatible fellows with a deep mutual understanding—even if one of them lives in a small country and is tending to be ashamed of it and the other lives in a big country and is proud of it.

There are 89 dailies in Finland, with a total circulation of about 2 million issues. Fifty of these are identified with a political party. Most of them can be classified as provincial papers: they are published in minor cities and they serve large community-type audiences.

The number of weeklies is 120, and their total circulation amounts to half a million. None of them is identified with a political party. Some of them are suburban or small-city papers, the majority still serving rural communities. They call themselves "local papers," which strongly points to the concept of the community paper. Ninety are published once a week (mostly on Friday), 10 semi-weekly and only 5 three times a week. So the proper translation for this Finnish paper group would be "the weekly community newspapers."

Twenty-two Finnish dailies have died in the years following World War II. In the same time, the number of weeklies has increased from 30 to 120. This development could be characterized as "the challenge of weeklies." It also could be characterized as a sound protection against homogenization of mass communications.

While many dailies are in financial trouble, essentially due to lack of sufficient advertising, the

*weeklies are relatively strong. Weeklies capture local advertising, devote to it 30-50 per cent of their space and finance with it two-thirds of the enterprise.*

*Also big advertising agencies favor weeklies in their nationwide campaigns, because they know that the community audience perceives its own paper as especially reliable (the average proportion of national advertising within the total ad space in weeklies is 10 per cent.)*

*Roundly one-third of the expense of a typical Finnish weekly is covered by the subscription fee, which is mostly about \$2 per year.*

*The annual budget of an average Finnish weekly with 4,000 circulation exceeds \$23,000. Almost half of it is spent for printing. Printing conditions very often dictate the life or death of a weekly.*

Consequently to ensure their business, most of Finnish weeklies are somehow associated with the printing business. For instance, eight weeklies are run by a larger printing house; in this case the newspapers are not separate companies. Eighteen weekly companies report the operation of their own print shops; in these cases the print shops are not separate companies. Mostly, both newspaper and print shop are different companies, but apparently at least partly owned by the same persons.

Most of the Finnish weeklies are owned and edited by private persons. Fifteen are published by a voluntary association (local fund, employee-or teacher club, etc.)

The Finnish weekly serves the community audience. Its role is typically independent but still a

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little bit conservative: it primarily aims to preserve the integrity of the community. This preserving role is evidently due to a kind of "self protection mechanism." In maintaining a sound community life it also ensures its own right of being. Too radical influences or too strong opinions hurt the integrity of the group—and also the welfare of the newspaper.

*On the other hand, the editors realize that a community weekly must not be a colorless, monotonous mirror of everyday happenings. The audience always expects little surprises, faint stimulation—even if unpleasant.*

*The editor's task is a fascinating play with two partly conflicting goals: the integrity of the community (conservative position) and the reading interest value of the paper (radical position).*

*The old weeklies understood "independence" as silence: they didn't speak about critical issues. The present weeklies have a new policy of "active impartiality": they point out the different aspects of an issue, they present the possibilities, but keep from making the choice for the reader.*

There has been much discussion about the problem "local or general material"? Most Finnish weeklies concentrate entirely on local material; they do not see much sense in including non-community material in a community paper. But there are some weeklies which are very active in discussing a variety of general subjects, such as politics, literature and religion.

Efforts of the Association of the Finnish Weeklies to regularly distribute general stories to the members have resulted in papers more and more adopting an active and broad-minded coverage policy.

The Association also organizes seminars for the editors and publishers, where journalistic and economic problems are thoroughly discussed. The Association used to be, for 20 years, mainly a means for expansion of weeklies. But today, with the country practically covered by weeklies, it has concentrated on raising the editorial level of the papers.

The Institute of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Tampere recently conducted a survey among the readers of the oldest weekly in Finland, *Tyrvaan Sanomat*. It came out,

among other things, that the motives for subscribing were the coverage of local material which one cannot get from other papers (48 per cent of the interviewed) and local advertising (34 per cent of the sample).

The readers seemed to strongly trust their weekly: 92 per cent of the most active readers and 71 per cent of the passive readers reported *Tyrvaan Sanomat* more reliable in local matters than other papers (dailies).

Much of the attitude of the audience towards its weekly is reflected by the fact that more than half of the readers keep the paper as long as two weeks before throwing it away.

For good reasons, therefore, the Association of the Finnish Weeklies has printed the following slogans on the back cover of its 20-year publication:

The weekly is closest to the heart of the reader.

The weekly will be read from word to word.

The weekly ensures the ad message will be carried to the destination.

## Urban Weeklies Fill Knowledge Gap

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carries clear possibilities, by local areas, for economic advantages through cooperatively solicited national advertising, lower cost for newsprint, etc.

*Thus the Weeklies can lawfully gain the economic advantages of the marketplace and at the same time preserve the thoughtful analysis of man-sized local problems. Above all, there will be an increase in pride of publishing a Weekly. For the Weeklies have long suffered from the canard that they only carry local gossip. Already many enjoy the power of thoughtful reporting about the local trivia. In fact, life is little more than a compilation of Trivia.*

For me, and I assume other concerned citizens, there are limits to my ability to digest knowledge about gross national product, the revamping of our railroad system, new educational techniques or even the logistics of health and medicines, or living on the moon. In brief, our great Republic cannot truly acquire or deserve a people knowledgeable on the Great Issues that face our nation and our plant unless we have enjoyed our Village Weekly and put our minds to the truly important Trivia of our lives.

# The Weekly Press of Finland

From the *Tyrvaan Sanomat*, Vammala, Finland

The number of weekly newspapers has been increasing during the last few years. They now exceed one hundred. *Tyrvaan Sanomat* (the weekly of Tyrvaa) has the honor of belonging to the pioneers; the founder of this weekly, teacher O. Vettenranta, has proved to be a far-sighted man since he began to edit this paper in the year 1894.

Also in other countries, where freedom of speech is appreciated and considered a promoting power in society, the weekly press has constantly expanded, while in the daily press a trend toward reduction and concentration can be noticed. This "newspaper death" is a serious problem, because it implies a gradual monopolization of press into the hands of a little group of people, which in a way points toward a government controlled totalitarian press.

The abundant and divergent weekly press, however, cannot be taken over by a concentrated ownership and leadership. Its audience and its advertiser sponsors are necessarily so diffuse that even these groups cannot have too strong an influence or control upon the paper.

Another important advantage of the weekly press is its freedom from party affiliation. On the other hand, this also means a weakness, because a neutral weekly is usually reluctant to hold any clear attitudes in local issues that are politically flavoured, and this diminishes its importance as a stimulating factor. It does not want to step on the toes of an interest group, on which it is mentally and economically dependent.

It is easier to debate on revolution in an African country than on some local issue; in the latter case, somebody always takes the arguments as personal attack, even if only communal matters and the public interest have been considered.

This neutral carefulness in local issues has, however, created very favorable and stable living conditions for weekly newspaper all over the country.

It is to be hoped, that after establishing a reliable economical basis they might be able in the future to devote themselves even more to the role of opinion stimulator. One important task of the press in a free society is to point out disadvantages and

promote reformation. An attitude-free neutrality and lack of courage are probably greater sins than a strong opinion in local issues. One would also expect a more sympathetic reaction from the part of the audience.

A kind of program for future promotion of the weekly press can be outlined as follows:

More attention should be paid to society and cultural issues. A weekly newspaper should contain more and more news material; its format will evidently become better and better, so the means for selling goods on its pages should be increased; the news pages should offer factual material, entertainment and humor in balance.

Debate on local issues will be sure to increase as society becomes more and more complicated, and consequently there is a need for wider research and more detailed planning. It belongs to the principles of democracy that common enterprises are sufficiently presented to all of those to whom they will concern.

The weekly press can everywhere accomplish more than it presently does as a presenter of local plans, as a questioner and as a forum for debate.

The task of a daily newspaper is to report national and international news material, comment on it and present issues that are related to these nationwide perspectives. The weekly press, on its part, finds its communicator task in smaller circumstances—somehow nearer to the man himself.

*Tyrvaan Sanomat*, April 30, 1966. Translated from Finnish by Kaarle Nordenstreng, now at Southern Illinois University on leave of absence from the University of Tampere, Finland. "The Weekly of Tyrvaa" is published twice a week, Wednesday and Saturday, in Vammala, a little town in Southern Finland. It is characterized as a "communal news and advertising paper" for Vammala and five rural communities in the neighborhood. Circulation of the paper is 8,300.

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## The People Will Adapt

The story of man is his ability to adapt to his environment. The story of institutions is the life cycle of struggle, acceptance, dominance, decay and repudiation.

In other words, the artifacts of civilization, tangible and intangible, are created by men under the pressure of need, used to serve a purpose, and abandoned when a better tool or way of doing things is discovered. In much of the world, as we know it, this is the fate of the stone axe, of primitive religion and of the tribal story teller. In our times axes have become mechanized, religion is more sophisticated, and the tribal story teller is called a journalist.

The same forces which transformed the stone axe into a modern industrial complex places at the disposal of the journalist a technology of amplification which, on superficial observation speeds up the flow of information and provides the freest exchange of ideas yet devised by men. But actually this is not true. Industrialized journalism, instead of increasing the opportunities of individual expression and individual reception of information, is more confining than the dungeons into which ancient mon-

archs cast the bearers of bad tidings or the gaols frequented by printers who had encountered the wrath of the Tudor kings. To the perceptive, industrialized journalism was in the last stages of the life cycle when the man with a story to tell became a caged parrot in the counting house, and the reader (listener and or viewer) a statistic in the market studies. But when those who control the vast apparatus of communication, management and labor, in their quarrels over the booty, turn off and on the flow of information, as other industrialists stop and start the assembly lines, no second sight is required to observe that *rigor mortis*, induced by repudiation, cannot be far away.

When men lose confidence in their institutions they abandon them.

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This screed was to have been an expression of righteous indignation, an indictment of arrogance and a call to arms against any management and labor so careless of moral obligation as to place selfish economic interests above the rights of the public to uninterrupted access to information. But without withdrawing these value judgments, it now appears more important, in the name of the public interest, to help to prevent a suicide. Three bright young men are at the bottom of it all. Graduate students in the Department of Journalism at Southern Illinois University, they undertook (as a term project in a seminar offered in another department) a team study of the newspaper strike in Carbondale, Illinois. Preliminary examinations of their findings are indeed frightening.

In New York, repeated strikes impaired the viability of the affected newspapers because the people, after doing without newspapers over long periods, found they required less variety when newspapers again were available. By the law of the jungle the weakest publishing operations failed to survive the stresses of the stoppages.

Now the Carbondale observations show that the shadow of Times Square rests heavily upon Main Street. It is a sad day for both labor and management, when the reaction to the lack of a local newspaper is, "Who cares?"

Of course it is unsound to draw generalizations from one small study of one small newspaper strike in one small town. Yet the manner in which the people turned to the electronic media and to the metropolitan newspapers lends validity to the thesis

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