

Media and Journalism in Global Turmoil

Keynote at 14th East African Communication Association (EACA) conference

“Africa and the Global Dialogue on Media and Communication”

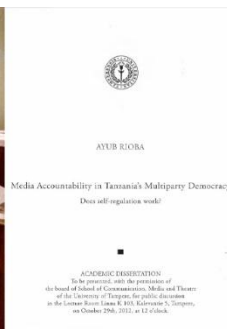
Dar es Salaam, 28 August 2024

Ullamaija Kivikuru & Kaarle Nordenstreng



Ullamaija:

Warm thanks for inviting us to this platform. It is not only historical but also nostalgic for me as I first visited the parastatal Tanzania School of Journalism back in 1978 as a UNESCO consultant advising on a new curriculum. Then in the early 1980's I served for nearly three years in the TSJ as lecturer and coordinator of studies provided by the Finnish development assistance.



Kaarle:

I followed Ullamajja as a spouse during my sabbatical and later after the turn of the millennium used to annually teach introductory courses at the School, which by then had been integrated as a faculty of the University of Dar es Salaam. I also organised an opportunity for a lecturer of the School to write a doctoral dissertation in Tampere. It was Ayub Rioba – currently Director General of Tanzania Broadcasting Corporation – defending his thesis in 2015 against the opponent, Professor Audrey Gadzekpo from Ghana, with me chairing the academic event.

Ullamajja:

But to the here and now: We shall introduce the theme of the conference with broad perspectives on media and journalism at this very time of state of global affairs which is universally considered to be in turmoil. It will be a very short and concise overview of broad perspectives. Our presentation with links to various sources is available for those who are interested in more details.

Kaarle:

My take on the turmoil identifies two megatrends operating behind everything in the contemporary world: *increasing militarism* and the *deteriorating state of the environment*. These are highlighted in a couple of figures.

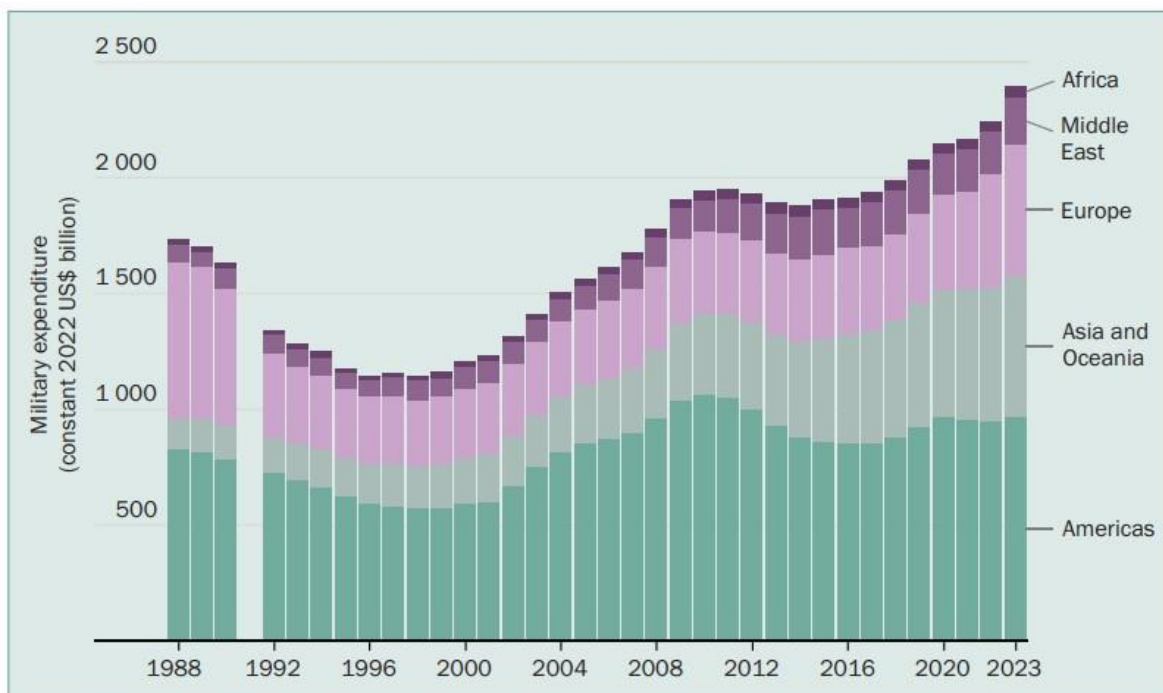
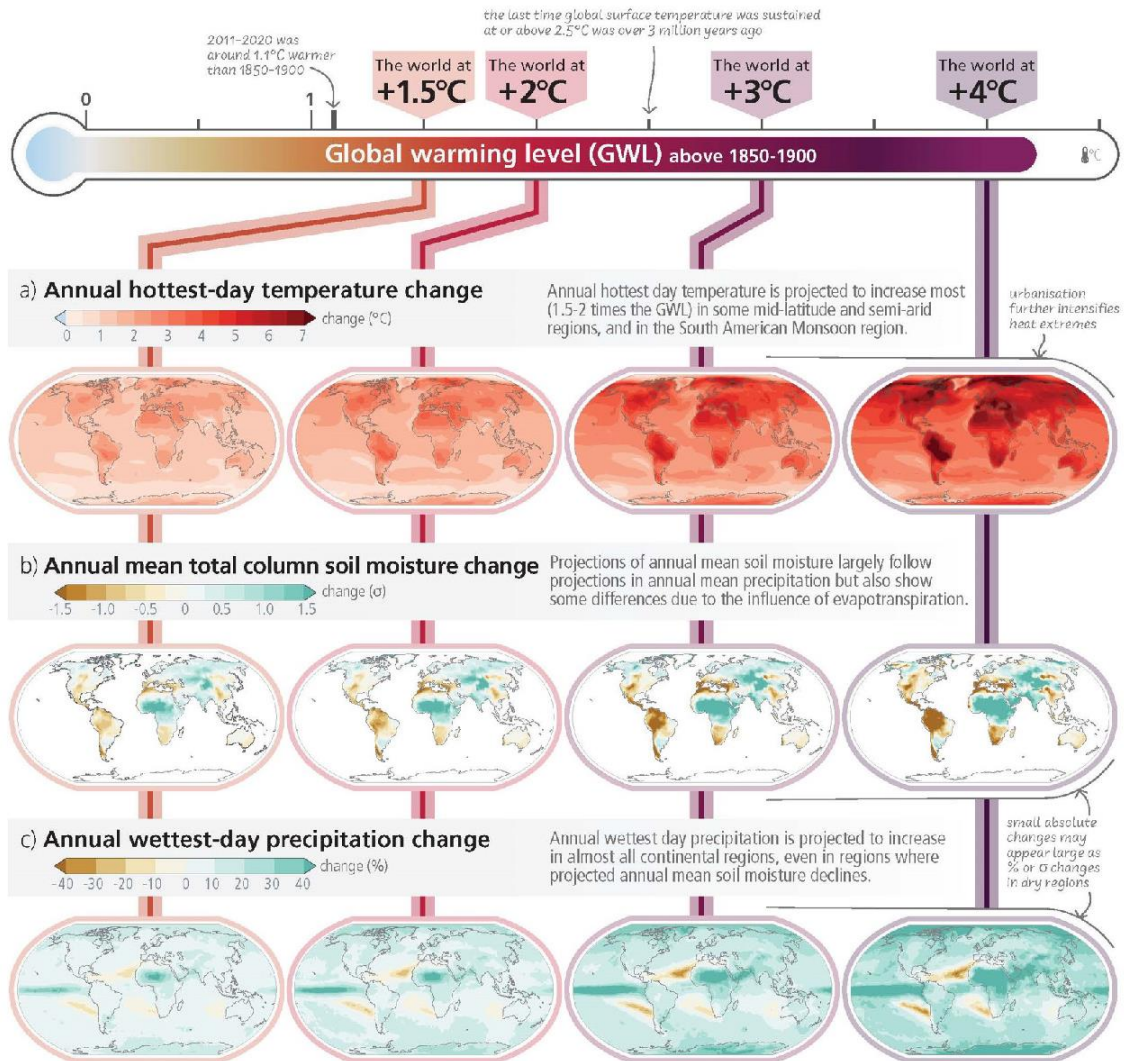


Figure 1. World military expenditure, by region, 1988–2023

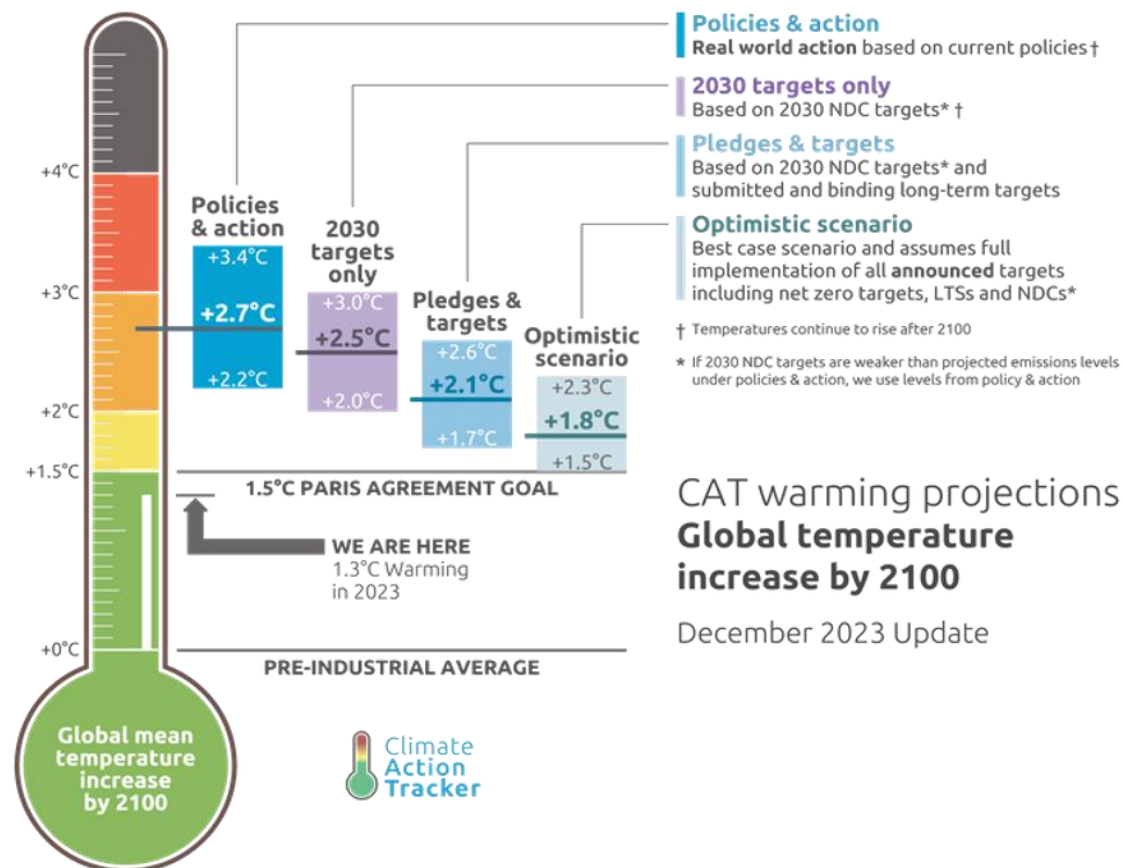
https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/2404_fs_milex_2023.pdf

The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute SIPRI shows how the world military expenditure, driven by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, rose by nearly seven percent in 2023, the highest level ever recorded by SIPRI. Also, in 2023 military spending increased in all five geographical regions for the first time since 2009. African military spending in the overall picture is marginal.



<https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/syr/>

This figure from the report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change IPCC demonstrates central consequences of global warming at different levels of the forecasts. Without going to details, the overall picture is really alarming.



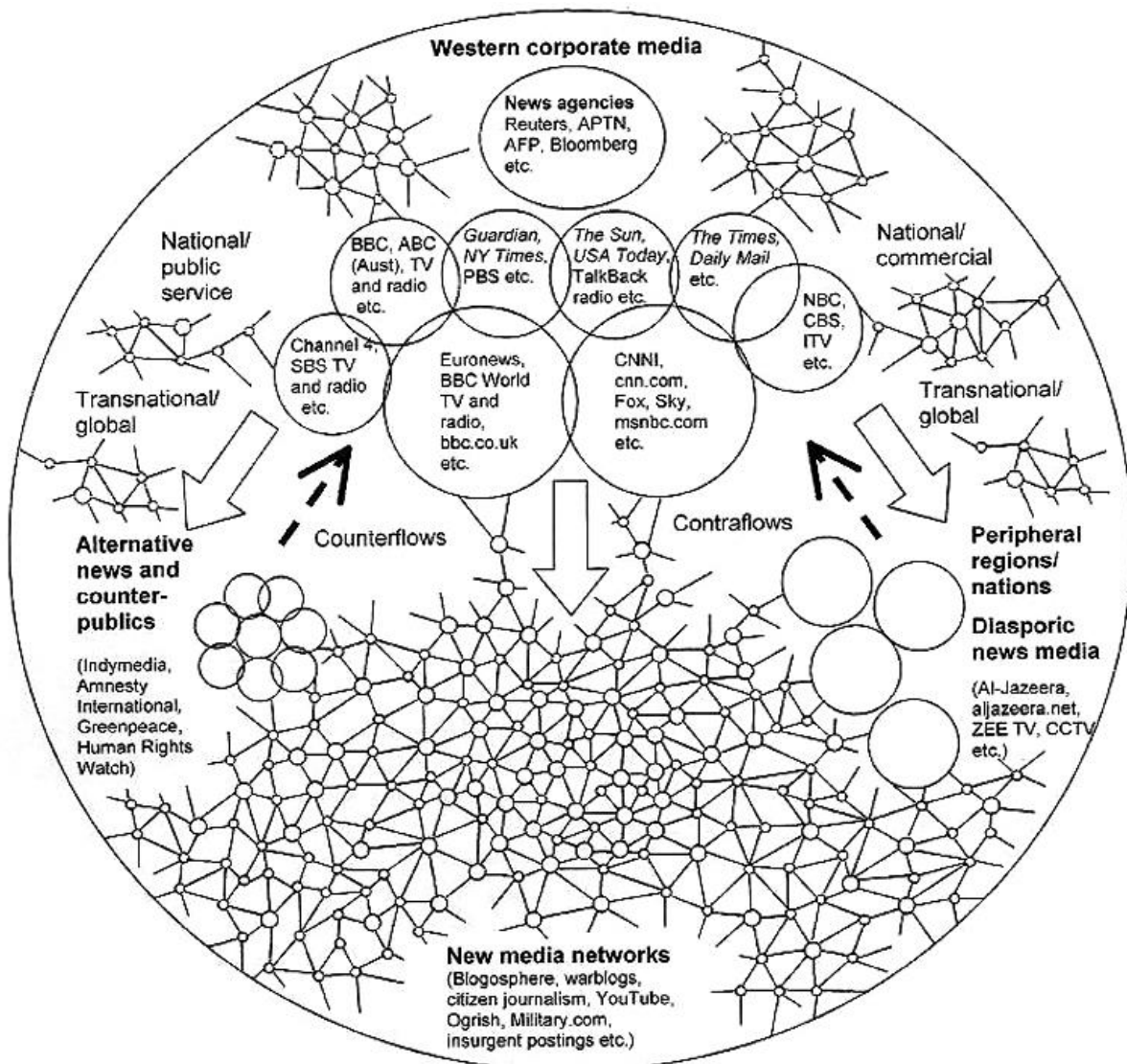
<https://climateactiontracker.org/global/cat-thermometer/>

And this figure from the Climate Action Tracker shows how the universally accepted Paris Agreement to limit the global warming to 1.5 degrees looks quite unlikely to be met by the end of the century. Even the most optimistic scenario of the Paris Agreement no longer appears to be realistic, while governments tend to pull back from the implementation of their pledges.

In short, the big picture of the world is distressing. Some even see that humankind is heading towards a global disaster in few decades.

Ullamajja:

What then could be the megatrends in the world of media and journalism? The British media scholar Simon Cottle reminded us 15 years ago that there is no scarcity of information available for reporting crises – quite the opposite; there is an *overflow of information*: mainstream facts, contradictory facts, alternative materials and – already then – the growing internet-based networks. Scarcity of sources was not the reason for poor catastrophe reporting. Today the sources are multiple and social media are continually expanding.



Simon Cottle (Cardiff University) *Global Crisis Reporting: Journalism in the Global Age* (Open University Press, 2009)

Kaarle:

The media world today is indeed far from a simple panorama of press, broadcasting, film and other conventional mass media. The media sector is dramatically expanded by the *social media*, which often reach more people, especially among the young generation, than do the conventional media. Also, it is important to realize that media today are deeply integrated into the *commercial sector* with all the media infrastructures and advertising, etc., occupying much more space in the financial market than the mass media, as shown by the list of the world's top ten media companies.

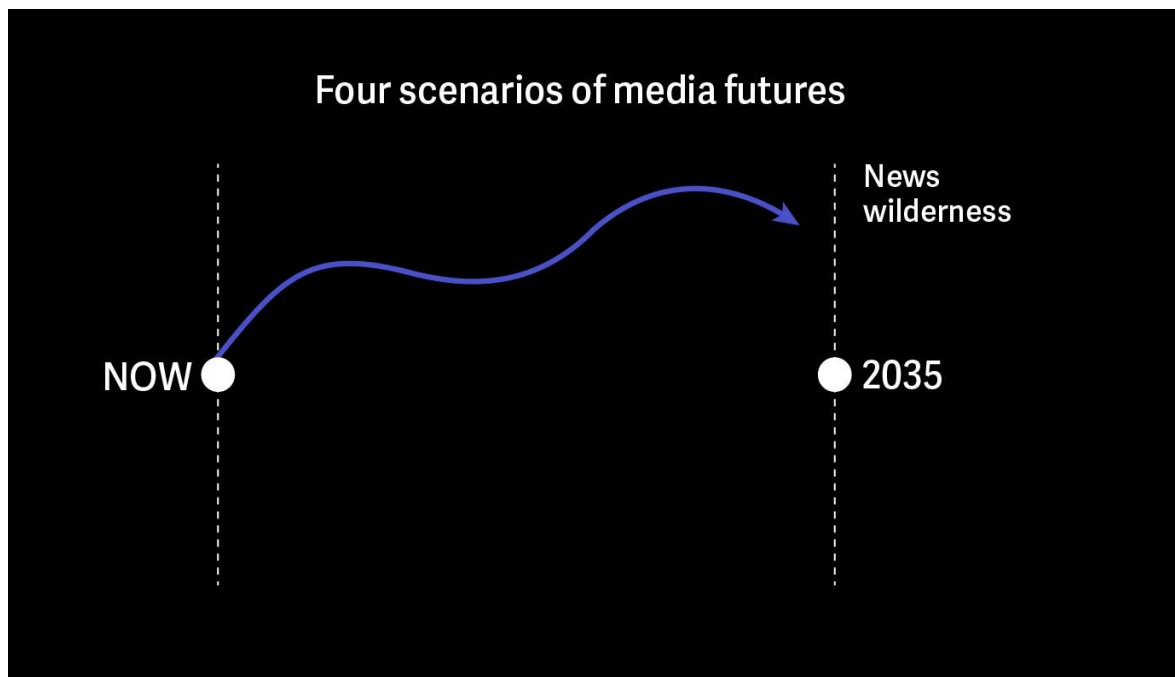
The World's Top Media Companies

1. Apple	\$3.22 Trillion
2. Netflix	\$2901 Billion
3. Walt Disney	\$181 Billion
4. Comcast	\$154 Billion
5. AT&T	\$137 Billion
6. SONY	\$104 Billion
7. Thomson Reuters	\$76 Billion
8. Charter Communications	\$43 Billion
9. FOX	\$7 Billion
10. Paramount Global	\$7 Billion

<https://www.investopedia.com/stock-analysis/021815/worlds-top-ten-media-companies-dis-cmsa-fox.aspx>

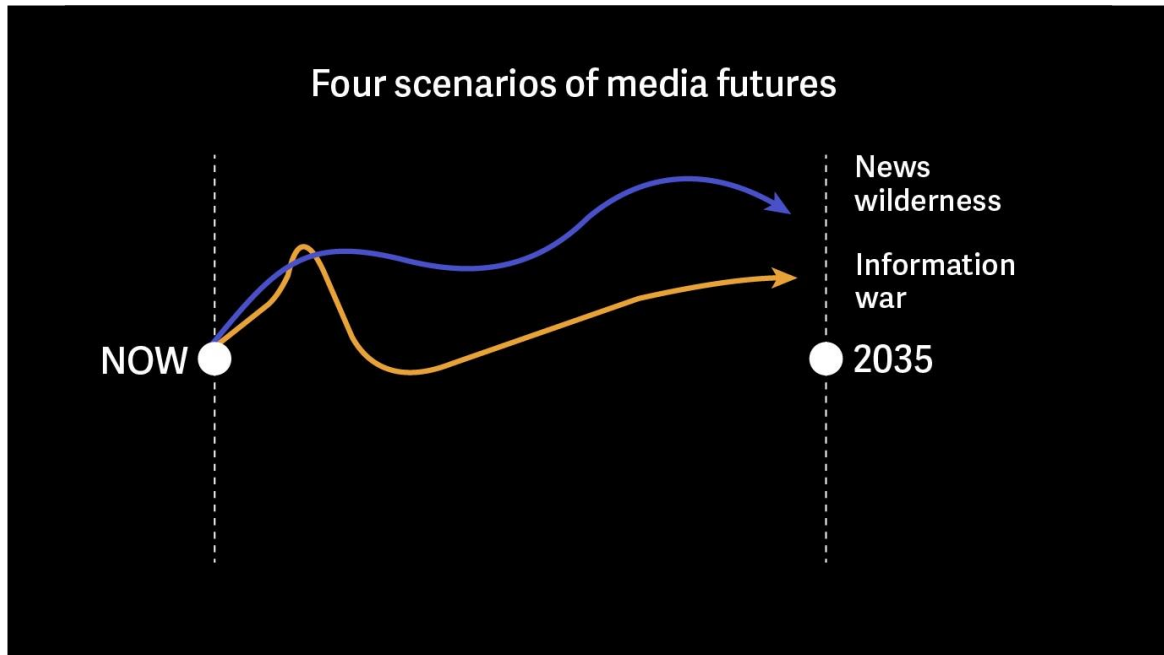
Ullamajja:

What about the future? Here is an example of forecasting media future. A group of our Finnish colleagues recently prepared scenarios for the Finnish mediascape by 2035. The situation in a highly developed Nordic country, of course, is not the same as in Africa, but there are some common elements, so the curves are worth analysing a little more closely.

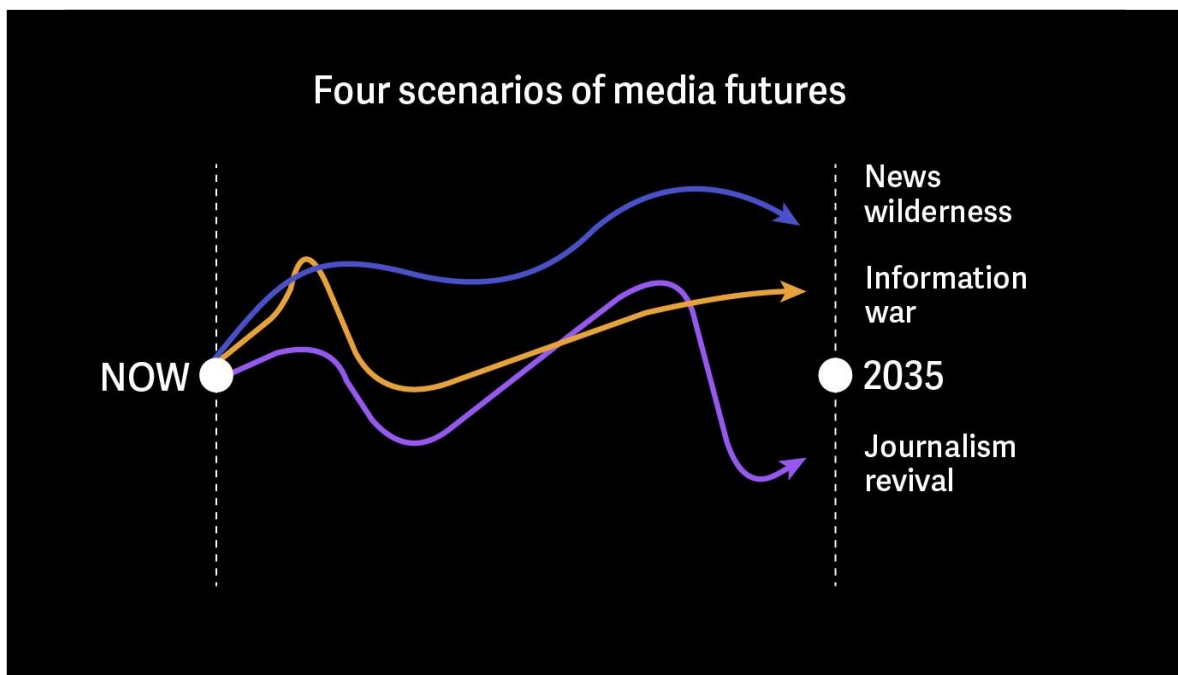


The first curve assumes that society develops roughly in the same manner as today. Accordingly, the media field is focusing on a 'news wilderness', a never-ending flow of news competing for the public's attention. Small tailored media are doing well, the big ones not so well. Competition is tough – and interestingly, most of the competing media are owned by the same companies, often multinationals. Expensive human work is reduced to a minimum. The result in 2035 is that the mediascape is filled with specified and hyper local media bubbles.

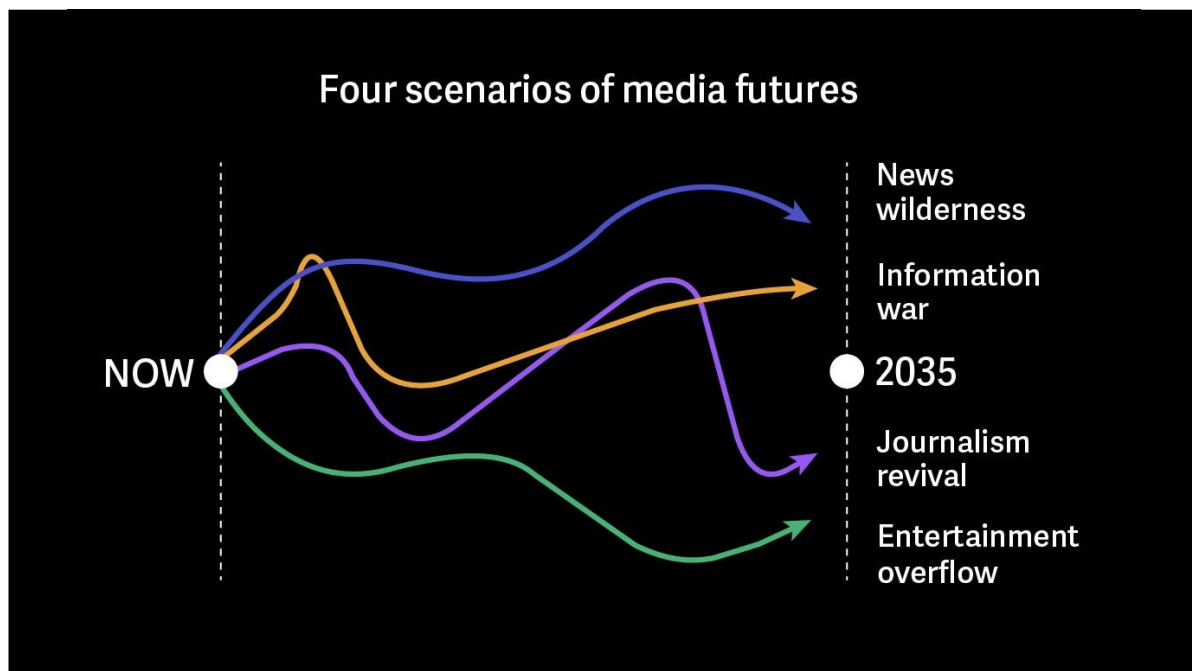
The public splits and develops mistrust, and even suspicion toward people living in other bubbles.



The second scenario highlights media under threat of war. In many small European countries, people have come to fear war. Finland has an over 1300 km shared border with Russia and Finns vividly remember the two wars against the Soviet Union 2-3 generations ago. According to this scenario, fear of war will increase and the role of the conventional media among the population will grow in importance. People will seek trustworthy information, protection and comfort; the need for information is high. But in such a situation, national security demands limit media freedom and patriotism gains strength. Deviant voices grow fainter.



The third scenario describes a 'wild' situation: Global warming has reached a phase where society is breaking up and geopolitical crises accumulate. The whole social system loses credibility, and so do the establishment media for a while. News volumes grow, but the quality of content declines. However, numbers of truth seekers gradually start to grow, and new media emerge, based on serious scrutiny of facts.



The fourth scenario suggests a polarised media use in society. The public is divided into small elites which can afford payment walls and a large 'digital precariat' which consumes large volumes of entertainment and is easily misled in larger social or political issues.

Entertainment is the real winner in the media business. The role of journalism declines. Big media companies operate on a monthly payment system, flooding their customers with huge volumes of low-quality entertainment content, often produced by AI.

Especially scenarios One and Four merit attention and reflection by media professionals. The two others seem to provide a safe place for quality journalism, but when the media can function more freely, they end up offering huge volumes of crash news or low-quality entertainment. It is not a very nice picture of media professions and the industries behind them.

Kaarle:

In practice, of course, life is shaped by different streams of developmental trends simultaneously and at least in our Northern conditions all four scenarios are likely to be included in the total mix. However, two persistent tendencies of journalism can be found everywhere as points for critical examination.

Ullamaija:

First, journalism tends to have a slightly schizophrenic relationship to the concept of time. *Speed* is considered ideal, although the right to the 'first definition' of a topic is largely gone while social media like Tik-Tok are always the winners in rapidity. In such a situation, it

would be best to invest in analysis and reflection, not speed of transmission. Second, journalism is fascinated by *novelty*. Many attempts to elevate its level have been made, but how many remember the alternative media, citizen journalism, community media, transparency, etc? Many of these have contributed something valuable to journalism, but they have not been digested and matured, because something new always appeared in the agenda.

Kaarle:

And let us not forget *truth* as the ultimate objective of journalism. Fake news and disinformation have given new impetus to reflect upon the art of truth seeking. However, unfortunately truth has not become a serious target of academic and professional analysis but rather a slogan for characterizing even a new 'post-truth era'. In this situation there is an urgent need for media in general and journalists in particular to understand the way in which contemporary reality is represented in various mediaspheres – the good old question of media vs. reality relationship as an aspect of philosophical epistemology.

What is needed is not cynical labeling of truth and objectivity as unattainable objectives – thus encouraging anti-intellectual postmodernism with an attitude that anything goes. Instead, serious consideration is needed of the nature of truth and its construction of piecemeal elements bound together by holistic ideas. Fact-checking as a part of this is essential, but it is not enough. Here journalism and media face a huge challenge, beginning with the classics of philosophy from Socrates and Plato on, including the sphere of values and ethics, and ending with issues of audience appreciation of media coverage, and the related trust of media by the public.

Ullamaija:

What about *Africa* in all this? First, it is definitely underrepresented on the global media arena, The big newsmakers have not found enough interest in Africa, and that is repeatedly reflected in rumors, misunderstandings and prejudices that media are spreading. More African research is needed on this theme; daring but academic comments are welcome!

Compared with European mediascapes, various African media sceneries appear far more interesting than European examples of the 'news wilderness'. And the African mediascapes also present challenges. There are dramatic variations in media availability within societies, there are different and demanding language choices to be made, radio still clings to its central place in society, there are developmental shades in most media activities, and narration is allowed more space in journalism.

Kaarle:

The tendency to become overenthusiastic about novelties is also visible in media research. It could be revealing to carry out analysis of dominant themes in international as well as in national academic journals of the field, internationally and nationally. When social media entered the communication arena, our professional journals became filled with articles discussing about 'a new era of democracy' while practically anybody could establish a discussion platform. Things did not turn out that way, as we know, rather the opposite. Now the fashionable theme is AI – it is everywhere, also included the catalogue of this conference.

Ullamaija:

We do not mean that researchers should not take an interest in fashionable themes. Research always promotes knowledge. However – and especially when complex and difficult topics are concerned – one might easily pronounce hasty judgements before knowing all the elements involved. And then, again a new fashion emerges, and the previous one is abandoned.

A perennial theme requiring interest, research and reflection is *decolonization* and its effects on present-day communication form and content. To be honest, we researchers have often paid lip service to this theme, while only relatively few serious attempts have been made to address it – even in Finland, which was colonized by Sweden for 600 years. Also Anglo-American media hegemony, which at one time was quite a fashionable theme, is by now largely ignored although its characteristics still lack proper analysis. Today BRICS and other challenges to the Western dominance in media world are also inviting updates of the decolonization paradigm – not to mention the African treasure house of the precious and painful legacies of colonialism. Hopefully it will this time be penetrating analysis and not just following a trend.

Kaarle:

Returning to the title of our presentation: Media and journalism are indeed operating amidst a global turmoil, but its own substance is also in deep turmoil. In order to understand both, it is not enough to focus on media and journalism alone; we need to keep a *balance* between this focus of our attention and the rest in the world, including the existential issues of humankind. In general, we should be wary of an excessively media-centered world view and even academic curricula should remind us of the need to study enough also other aspects of life. Only such an approach will guarantee ethically mature and responsible scholarship.

Ullamaija:

Thank you. Asante.

<https://researchportal.helsinki.fi/fi/persons/ullamaija-kivikuru>

<https://sites.tuni.fi/kaarle>