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More with less: recession experienced in the newsroom of the Finnish Public Service
Broadcasting Company

This paper examines how recession has been experienced in the YLE (Finnish Broadcasting company). The latest recession has resulted in cuts of journalistic workforce in the daily newspapers in Finland and elsewhere. Implications of these cuts are intensified in traditional media by the increase of Internet and mobile news publications. Thus, cuts in workforce, technological developments, and increased competition for news have brought significant structural changes to the media field.

The following examines the ways in which these changes are experienced in the YLE newsroom. Although YLE is not in the immediate heart of the crisis in 2010 due to its financing structure, recession has created various pressures to re-structure and sharpen the operations in public service broadcasting.

Based on interviews conducted in the spring of 2010, this paper highlights changes in journalistic practices and the emerging role of new media in YLE. The focus is on the organisational shifts (combined operations), technological (role of the Internet), and generational change (promise of the net generation).

One of the implications of the recession and increased competition in the media field in Finland has been public debate on the YLE payment. This debate, lead by the Finnish Newspaper Association, was particularly heated during the spring of 2010 and targeted to redesign YLE payment from a licensing fee to a household allocated tax payment. The debate, also striving to redefine the public service task, seemed to have strong political

impact on the future of YLE. This debate also affected the journalists working for YLE, which will be discussed below.

Research project

This study is part of a one-year research project “How Will the Recession Affect Journalism?” which started in January 2010. The research project examines what kinds of journalistic processes, practices and actors grew stronger or weaker owing to the economic recession of 2008-2009. It focuses especially on 1) the changes in journalistic source practices 2) the consequences of news production done outside the traditional media, and 3) the changes in the status and working capacity of different types of media actors. The research material consists of statistics, textual analysis, interviews, and an expert panel (in December 2010).

The interviews, on which this paper is mostly based, were conducted in February-April 2010. A preliminary survey was conducted in February to collect information on the general views in the newsrooms. The idea was that an average of three journalists from each newsroom would be selected from the survey data for further interviews. With the preliminary survey we wanted to make sure that we get a variety of experiences represented in the study. However, the entry response of the surveys was in some cases very low and therefore four journalists were selected directly without preliminary survey for the interview. Also, two of the journalists refused to be interviewed due to their anxiety over the research topic.

We tried to choose journalists at different career stages: the early stage (temporary contract, or only few years experience), mid career stage (10-15 years), or end career stage (10 years to pension). We also chose one journalist in a leading or managerial position to be interviewed from each media.

Overall, the study includes journalists working in three newspapers, two national television newsrooms, and one online publication.

The individual interviews were conducted mostly in the newsrooms. In some cases, the journalists wanted to meet outside the newsroom, so the interview was arranged in nearby cafe. Three of the interviews were made over the phone.

The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity, which appeared to be extremely important. Many of the interviewed felt that they had difficulties in expressing their views openly in the newsroom and were afraid of getting labelled as 'difficult' or accused of disclosing delicate information. However, the overall atmosphere in the interviews was good and trustful. They lasted approximately from an hour to an hour and a half. The interview data was transcribed and coded with Atlas.ti software. In the analysis of the data (still in process), we focused on the organisation and structuring of the daily work, changes in workforce: lay-offs, pensions and contracts, relations to online and other media, experience of professionalism and visions of the future.

Recession in Finland

The Finnish media market is characterised by strong companies with specified markets, and modest, yet intensifying competition. The public service broadcasting company, YLE, has two significant competitors in the television markets, namely MTV3 and Nelonen, both of which are commercial channels. The first one is owned by Swedish Bonnier and the latter by SanomaWsoy. SanomaWsoy is a powerful company, owning also the largest national newspaper Helsingin Sanomat with a circulation of 430 000. With a superior position in the market, HS faces only modest competition from other dailies, namely regional newspapers (Aamulehti, Turun Sanomat, Kaleva etc.). Thus, the media markets in Finland are lead by the commercial company SanomaWsoy (newspapers, magazines, book publishing and broadcasting), YLE (public service broadcasting), Bonnier's MTV3 (broadcasting) and Alma Media (focus on (regional) newspaper publishing and electronic market places) (cf. Ahva forthcoming, Jyrkiäinen 2001, Sundin 2009).

In Finland, media companies and newspapers, in particular, have enjoyed a fairly secure position, protected by the specific language area with specific markets, high level of news consumption, subscription-based market and home delivery system. However, the latest recession predicted turbulence in the financial situation of even the most well-established media companies. This was mainly caused by the decrease in advertising and circulation

(the income of Finnish newspapers originates equally from the subscriptions and the advertisements). The overall media advertising decreased 19.4 percent between 2008 and 2009. Decline in advertising hit the hardest on newspapers with 23.8 percent drop and television with 13 percent, respectively, whereas Internet advertising increased with 9.4 percent

The decline of circulation was modest (largest national newspaper Helsingin Sanomat - 1.8 percent, tabloids Ilta-Sanomat -8.4 percent and Iltalehti -6.6 percent), yet the emergence of the Internet and social media has posed more profound concern over the future of traditional media and their capability to attract younger audiences and new subscribers.

In real terms, recession hit the Finnish media at the beginning of 2009, when media companies around the country went through negotiations of re-structuring and possible lay-offs. Consequently, these negotiations arrived as a shock to journalists who were used to secure jobs. As a result, many newsrooms faced decline in workforce. Workforce was reduced in regional newspapers (Savon Sanomat -15, Etelä-Suomen Sanomat -9, and Turun Sanomat -13) as well as in one national television newsroom (Nelonen -21).

Downsizing of the newsrooms was mostly realised with pension packages. According to the Finnish Journalists Association, altogether 200 of its members were given notice in 2009 and little fewer than 100 took the pension package.

It seems that media companies reacted fast to the changes in the markets – even too fast according to many journalists who felt that ‘recession discourse’ served as an excuse for the media companies to rationalise, gain more efficiency and profit. Indeed, most of the media companies gained profit in 2009 (Sanoma 193 million euros, Alma Media 40 million euros, MTV 12 million euros). The result of some of the companies declined but still remained profitable. This was also the case with YLE which made a profit of 1.9 million euros in 2009. However, YLE had been struggling during the past eight years to improve its result and break even from the deficit of the early 2000s (-50 million euros in 2005). The launching of digital television in 2001, with two new television channels, was a major challenge for YLE and a step to a new media environment. YLE’s budget deficit and expenses were growing from 2001 to 2005, until Mikael Jungner started as the new director general, with the task of balancing the company’s finances by 2008.

Thus, unlike other media companies in Finland, YLE has been rationalising and restructuring its operations from 2001 on, whereas other media companies faced the financial plunge in 2009. However, recession did create pressures also in YLE, although according to its financial statement of 2008, YLE was supposed to move on to an age of “prosperity and development” (YLE Financial Statement 2008, 2). First, several measures were made in 2009 to cut down expenses in the operations of the newsroom (I will return to this in more detail later on). Secondly, pressures from outside of YLE increased and questioned its financial structure.

One of the big issues behind the measures taken in media companies concerns the emergence of the Internet as an increasingly significant media in the everyday life of the Finnish people. The Internet has proven to attract particularly young people and introduce new kinds of participatory practices. Virtual communities, discussion groups, networking and blogging in social media have introduced new models of public participation and dissemination of information (Jenkins 2007, Heinonen 2008; Lietsala&Sirkkunen 2008, 153)

As we know, this poses new challenges to traditional mainstream media which has to find out ways to compete with open and free Internet content and the participatory elements of social media. Developments in digital media also raise concern over the future of the print media. All of the newspapers have online versions of the print paper; however, the role between online and print seems to be somewhat obscure. Moreover, Internet publications still lack successful business models on how to gain profit online. Although Internet advertising is on the rise, it concerns mostly search engine advertising.

So far the position of print media in Finland seems solid but the challenge of digital media is clearly lurking around the corner. These tensions and threats converged in a debate in 2009 with a confrontation between YLE and The Finnish Newspaper Association. I will return to this discussion later.

YLE Newsroom

As mentioned above, several measures had been taken already during the past eight years to cut down expenses at YLE. Therefore, YLE did not face similar sudden changes in

2009 as did other national news media. As a financing model, the licensing fee protects YLE from sudden turbulence in the financial markets. However, as argued by Clark (2002), global economic trends affect public service in various ways, for example in the application of various reforms that follow neoliberal principals.

In YLE, the pressure to re-structure and rationalise operations resulted in workforce cuts in the newsroom in 2009. Unlike in previous years, in 2009 the newsroom did not hire any new summer replacements from the open markets; instead, summer replacements were hired from the company's own departments.

These changes were experienced in various ways within the newsroom. Not surprisingly, journalists in more leading positions tend to see these changes as productive, or at least they are seen as leading to the right direction. Most critical views are voiced by journalists who are working on a temporary contract. However, the interviews also showed high level of commitment towards YLE as an employer. Unlike in other interviews, YLE journalists did not contemplate on leaving YLE and finding work from another company. Of course, my sample is very limited and too many generalisations should not be made of these interviews. Instead of generalisations, or typifications, this data aims to describe the experience of change in a work place from the grassroots level, as well as connect these experiences to the macro level of changes in the Finnish media markets.

Re-structuring, again

In 2008, YLE combined its radio and television news desks. YLE has restructured its news organisation to cut down overlaps. Now YLE news is bigger, and there is no competition between radio and television as there use to be.

“Well, the whole saving thing started with putting radio and television newsrooms together. So, now we don't have separate radio news and television news. It's just YLE news.” Reporter, female, mid-career

“It was supposed to be because of cuts, but we talk about this a lot. I mean how much saving can it be when such a huge organisation is put together because small organisation is often nimble but in big one there are so many people to inform. So much from our time goes to explaining to different people what I have done, whom I’ve called and what they said.” Reporter, female, mid-career

However, a journalist in a managerial position sees the fusion as productive.

“I think it was a smart move really because now there are more people to do the work whereas previously they were, in a way, and for real, competing against each other.”

News editor, male, mid-career

In this one news desk, journalists create news stories for radio, television and on-line. This is also seen as a move away from specialising towards multi-tasking. However, it is not so much the journalists than the technical staff who are under fire. On-going studio reform aims at reducing staff from the technical department. One of the managers puts it bluntly:

“To rationalise and create new opportunities, but in Finnish it means we have to get it done with fewer people. So their (technical staff) concern is real and they also have more temporary staff than the journalists”. News editor, male, mid-career

One of the examples of such rationalisation is the new studio acquired for the late night news. The news studio requires only one person from the technical staff, while the previous studio required three people (director, mixer and sound engineer) to broadcast the news.

YLE also terminated contract with the Finnish News Agency STT (in 2007) which used to provide all day-to-day news. STT was replaced by YLE’s own journalists and therefore all the news supply on the YLE website is produced (and therefore copyrighted) by YLE.

Re-structuring news desks seems to be one of the main answers to fight recession, loss in readership/audience, or any other kind of difficulties in the business. Similar moves of organisational reform were realised in all the newsrooms included in this study. Usually these include new forms of co-operation, combinations or fusions of departments, and even other media. Experiences of the re-structuring were also polarised: management found them more or less successful, or at least necessary, while journalists complained about overlaps, disorientation and inefficiency. The leading national newspaper combined its domestic and “city” news desks, while regional newspapers have gone further and created co-operation and shared news between each other in a regional newspaper ‘pool’. Co-operation was also one of the main means used by regional newspapers in the previous recession of the 1990s (Torvinen 1994).

Particularly more experienced journalists expressed ‘restructure-fatigue’, having to get used to yet another change. Complaints were targeted mostly towards the organisation of the daily work and not towards new technology, which resonates with previous studies (Jyrkiäinen 2008; Ahva 2010)

One of the major changes in the daily work of journalists concerns the integration of the online news as part of their tasks. In YLE, this has happened during the past two years. Before, news desks had their separate Internet reporters. Making online news is considered to be extra work that has to be done on top of everything else.

“We’d had that for about a year, I would say. Besides radio- and television stories, we are required to make also stories for our website. And there was really no discussion and we didn’t get more salary or hours, we just had to suddenly write with the same salary yet another story of different format. [...] I still think that my main task is the radio and television stories, and I need to take care that I make those in time. But the problem is that now that we are “multi-media” we shouldn’t think that we have one main task. My main task is radio, television and the net [laughter]. Mostly I finish the radio and television story first and then whatever time is left I use for the net version and I’ll write it on the basis of the radio story.”

Reporter, female, early-career

The interviewed news editor recognises this burden, however, sees no alternative than push through the concept of multi-media know-how.

“Sometimes they have to write in great pressure because it is online, so. We also promise in the end of our television news that all our news with backgrounds can be found from our website. It is a big promise, and it is a bigger effort than in newspapers because we make the news rather traditionally, text-based, so it is easier in newspapers to make those versions when the story is done since the format is the same [...] We have to push through this multi-media. It means that you can, you have to know how to make a story on TV, radio and online. Half of the reporters already know how to make a story on TV and radio just like that, so to make a story online...once you know the programme, then you can do it”

Male, news editor, mid-career

It seems that the challenges appear surprisingly similar in different newsrooms. Pressures to provide updated online news caused re-structuring of other newsrooms as well.

Newspapers, particularly, struggled to keep up with the developing news, and due to the competition with continuous online timeframe, their reporting became more evening-focused. Thus, news stories that were created in the morning shift evolved throughout the day and sometimes the point of view chosen in the morning was reversed in the evening. Consequently, workload per individual story seems to have increased and some journalists in the study complained that they would save time and unnecessary work by beginning in the afternoon instead of morning. (cf. Juntunen 2009).

TV news for the old, online for the young

Pressures to appear active on the Internet are part of the media competition and interestingly interpreted through a generational lens. The reporters connected appearance on the Internet with younger audiences and found Internet as the main tool to attract the young.

“Internet, yeah, I think that there we can attract younger clients. I agree that we should keep our news there and also feed in some lighter news, so that people realise, to get those young people there, later in life also to here, in YLE news.”

Reporter, female, mid-career

“I don’t know if you’ve heard about this but we talk about this “three-five-seven” which is based on something...But it is a kind of code name for these topics that some urban people might want read as Internet stories. So, these kinds of topics go through now a lot more easily than let’s say two years ago. [...] The uncle-like leaders of the newsroom have begun to understand that we need to cover more of these feature-like stories, not so hard news, but ones that are closer to everyday life and closer to those gender and age groups that we need to pursue.”

Reporter, male, early career

“Well, this is the eternal problem that we have; how to reach the young adults. YLE has such a strong hold among the older viewers. [...] Our news is really boring and heavy sometimes. In some news broadcasts we have only economy and politics and labour markets and strikes, so that it can be very tiresome [...] every broadcast should include some lighter topics, that would discuss, we would go close to people, engaged in the everyday life.”

Reporter, female, mid-career

This concern over young audience is shared also by other news media in this study. Newspapers and the commercial television struggle to reach young audiences. During the re-structuring of newsrooms, besides offering older reporters pension packages, many of the newspapers realised facelift among the editors and department leaders. The aim to rejuvenate newsrooms and their leadership resonates with the concerns over the emerging Internet generation. Younger leaders, being closer to the target group, may have better chances of finding means to reach the young.

Thus the competition for the viewers focuses on age and technology: the youth and the Internet.

The role of the Internet increased significantly in YLE during the past two years with the development of new Internet platforms. YLE introduced a free archive, *Elävä Arkisto*, (“Living Archive”) in 2006 and in 2007 *YLE Areena* was launched. YLE Areena provides free viewing of YLE programmes after they have been broadcasted. The strong emphasis on the Internet was a result of a new strategy introduced by the head of YLE. Michael Jungner, the director general of YLE (2005-2010) was particularly enthusiastic about the participatory culture and social media, even to the extent that the personnel of YLE was encouraged to use social media, make profiles and interact with viewers and listeners on the Internet. Jungner himself made a video diary of his personal life (music video confessing love to his wife) and published it on YouTube. Jungner’s videos caused public amazement and criticism also inside YLE. Jungner, however, continued to actively use social media (other videos, Facebook, Twitter) and emphasise the importance of the Internet in the future of YLE.

The use of social media in the newsroom, however, had not increased distinctly. The reporters of the newsroom were not enthusiastic about social media and its possibilities, but it is recognised as a potential source for news stories.

“Well, I finally joined the Facebook last October, so it’s been five-six months now. First it was kind of, no, I am definitely not joining, it was just a repulsive thought to me. But then I joined and I’m still sceptical and I don’t really like it, but I must say I’ve got some ideas for stories through Facebook.” Female, reporter, mid-career

Journalists at YLE are also concerned about their privacy. Having to represent the company 24 hours a day is not appealing to everyone.

“I am pretty bad at it, I am not even, I used to be in Facebook, but I left because I noticed that I wanted to keep my privacy in a way. I use Twitter every now and then.” Male, news editor, mid-career

Certain discrepancy was apparent in YLE's public policy and its realisation in practice and on personal level. However, the development of "Areena" and the archive, "Elävä Arkisto" (Living Archive), seems to have been successful and lauded by the audiences and personnel alike.

The way YLE acquired salient role on the Internet was not left without notice. In the spring of 2008 the Finnish Newspaper Association and Finnmedia started a public discussion of the YLE payment. It is a discussion that can be interpreted as a concern over the role of YLE in the media markets and concern over the future of the newspapers and their online operations.

YLE Debate

In the spring of 2009, the so called Lintilä Commission, appointed by the parliament, suggested a specific YLE payment to cover 415 million euro expenses. The YLE payment would be collected from each household, as well as from companies and communities with yearly revenue of over 400 000 euros. The YLE payment (175 euros) would replace the current user-specific licencing fee (224 euros) that is not adequate any more. It is also considered outdated since it is based on ownership of television while today YLE content is distributed by internet and mobile phones.

Commission's proposal caused intensive debate on the YLE budget and the role of public service broadcasting. Particularly, the commercial competitors of YLE, Helsingin Sanomat and MTV3 criticised strongly the new suggested model and described it as "a blow to free competition in media markets" (23.4.2009 YLE News, 23.4. 2009 Iltalehti). The chairman of the Newspaper Association, Mikael Pentikäinen (also the new editor in chief of Helsingin Sanomat), attacked strongly against the YLE payment and demanded independent council to control YLE in its role of public service.

In October 2009, the government decided to go on with the YLE payment as suggested by the commission, with the new controlling council also represented. However, lobbying continued and media agents called for yet another finance model: YLE's expenses should be covered from the taxes.

During the spring of 2009, the debate culminated as a feud between YLE and Helsingin Sanomat. The editor in chief of Helsingin Sanomat, Mikael Pentikäinen, criticised YLE's decisions to offer free contents to distribution, mobile and media companies. Pentikäinen also criticised YLE's decision to co-operate on the Internet with a commercial online daily journal, Uusi Suomi and questioned YLE's news distribution on public displays. The extent of news distribution was seen to go beyond public service and harm free competition.

"YLE's decision to distribute content in different platforms narrows down the pluralism of media and living space of the commercial media", Pentikäinen argued (Kallionpää 2009)

In the end, the government could not find agreement on the YLE payment and the whole decision was postponed until after the 2011 elections. The debate evoked heated discussions and interpretations inside YLE.

"It is clear that the project led by newspapers and Finnmedia (The Federation of the Finnish Media Industry) has been fierce, and they talk and it is quite understandable that they voice their own agenda here [...] and if we say delicately, it is about the borderline between public service and commercial media but in reality it is about the fact that they got angry because YLE appeared so powerfully on the Internet." Male, news editor, mid-career

The concern voiced over YLE's role implicates more profound concern over the new technology, the Internet, and the new media generation. By disseminating television content on the Internet, YLE challenged newspapers who are struggling to keep their readers interested and loyal to print media. Situation appears bleak for the commercial media who are losing advertisers and still have no sustainable business model for the Internet. At the same time, YLE needs not to worry about the Internet business model since its costs are covered by the citizens.

Much of the debate came down to the meaning of ‘public service’. Representatives of the commercial media voiced their concern over YLE’s trespassing on commercial media’s backyard with extensive online content and therefore wanted clearer definition for public service. However, definitions of public service, i.e. what it includes or excludes, were conflicting.

Originally, according to the commission’s proposal, the public service task was seen in need of re-definition not because of the commercial agents but because of transformations in the audience practices connected with the development of media technology. The commission proposed that the public service task should “bring diverse and extensive programmes to everyone’s reach, which means utilizing new technology to develop content and distribution.” Public service should also include programmes that reach the young. (Ministry of Transport and Communications 2009.) These proposals were interpreted to increase YLE’s impact on the Internet and mobile markets, a development that was strongly opposed by the commercial media.

The Finnmedia (The Federation of the Finnish Media Industry), on the other hand, had called for a re-definition of public service to include solely “programme content that is produced for civic, democratic or cultural needs. Other contents and services belong to the commercial field. Operations that are based on public funding and distort the markets should not be used to debilitate market-based media field.” (Finnmedia 2009)

The debate intensified the division between commercial and public service media and it was also experienced strongly among the personnel of YLE. The news reporters felt that they had to represent YLE and explain their view on the YLE payment also during their free time. Some even experienced aggressive attacks in parties from people who were against the payment.

“People have extremely strong emotions and opinions and you can’t just avoid taking some of that frustration personally, as many of us feel we are the representatives of the company” Reporter, male, early career

With strong emphasis on the difference between the commercial and public service media, the debate addressed audiences and journalists as “either or”; thus, the debate seemed to have reasserted news reporters’ identities as “YLE people, or “yleläinen”. However, the YLE debate created concern over the future of individual reporters and the whole institution. At the time of the interviews, public discussion was pointing towards tax-based funding of 480 million euros. This was interpreted as secured funding, although exposed to the changes in political decision making.

“Many realized how narrow the thread is that we are hanging on. Few years ago, when we had the last discussion, when we elected the current manager, the amount of licensing fee payers dropped suddenly and that was reflected in the newsroom immediately.[...] It’s like resigning from church, when people start to talk about it in public, people start doing it.”

News editor, male, mid-career

Although there was concern over the future resources, journalists in the newsroom believed that the news is the stronghold of YLE and actually the purest example of the public service.

“The newsroom has always been independent in a way that it is the last, that’s what we think anyway, that it is not the first one when they start to weed runners. So if we think of public service, then news is considered to be it, even internationally.” Male, news editor, mid-career

“Even if YLE was to be torn apart by politicians and enraged citizens, even if the operations were externalized [...] There will be a small group of people who treasure the brand and there is this YLE, couple of TV channels broadcasting in the name of YLE, and also some radio channels. The whole programme side is bought from outside, using wage slaves, from indie companies.[...] And the only actual “Skill-Centre” that is standing here, is the news and current affairs department. And therefore, I will also be working here.” Male, reporter, early career

Conclusions: convergence culture

Experiences of recession in the Finnish media are closely related to the technological development and the emergence of the Internet. Indeed, the role of the online media seems to be in the heart of the crisis. Newspapers, particularly, wonder how to hold on to their readers, keep print media in business and at the same time search for new business models for the Internet.

These concerns are also present in YLE although in a different way. The YLE newsroom shares the concerns of many other Finnish newsrooms with constant re-structuring of the daily work, combination of operations, rationalisations, and decrease in workforce: specialised reporters are replaced with multi-media skilled (young) journalists. Like other media, YLE is also concerned about young audiences and seeks new forms of journalism online. However, unlike commercial media, YLE has been successful on the Internet.

As argued by Taisto Hujanen (2002, 133), during the 1990s YLE adopted a new style of management and corporate culture that strived for new kind of professionalism and market-oriented approach. After the initial digitalisation process, YLE has continued to deepen the professional corporate culture with new investments in digital media environment. YLE's new policy can be described as convergence culture that makes use of the multiple platforms of digital culture and participatory practices of the audiences (Jenkins 2006). Henry Jenkins suggests that convergence is both a top down corporate driven and a bottom up consumer driven process (latter being discussed as participatory culture). Convergence culture in corporations means new strategies of content development and distribution that serve "the synergy between the different divisions of the same company" (Jenkins 2006).

From the perspective of the commercial media, the impact of the participatory culture seems contradictory. It entails promise of new active audiences yet, at the same time, this participation threatens the role of professional journalism: media content is created and disseminated increasingly by and among ordinary citizens blurring the lines between amateurs and professionals. Moreover, the online environment offers limited possibilities for advertising and subscription income; finance models that frame the current Finnish media at large.

This convergence policy of YLE has created a strong brand, visibility and new audiences; however, it has increased competition and rivalry between public service broadcasting and the commercial media in Finland. In this conflict, the role of public service broadcasting is being re-defined: on the one hand, the adoption of the new online platforms by YLE is seen as part of information society, promotion of participation and citizenship, and on the other, it is interpreted as an expansion of public service to the areas of commercial media, thus narrowing and threatening the media markets in Finland. Overall, the conflict has resulted in an uncertain future for YLE with the payment model still open and undecided.

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