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Colluding to Conceal the Co-operative Difference? A Discourse Analytical Study of Finnish S Group's Nationwide Price-drop Campaign

Anu Puusa and Sanna Saastamoinen

In 2015, consumer retailer S-ryhmä (S Group), the biggest co-operative group in Finland, launched a nationwide operation to cut the prices of hundreds of consumer products. The operation became national news with lengthy discussions on various forums. This article analyses those discussions via the lens of two significant Finnish newspapers. Using a discourse analytical approach, we argue that news discourses reflect dominant norms of private ownership; maximising profits as the primary purpose for businesses; and a presumptively competitive ethos for commercial life. In the S Group campaign, newspaper coverage largely reflected lack of knowledge or interest in co-operatives' unique features. Consequently, we suggest newsroom reforms and journalism education that acknowledge the characteristics and purposes of different business forms would yield more meaningful representations of economic and social reality. School of journalism and in-service instruction in economic pluralism, including co-operative education, would thus advance journalism's professional commitment to truth-seeking and robustly democratic self-governance. However, we note the active complicity of the co-operative federation in setting the news agenda, encouraging the framing of their actions as a simple price war. The extent to which co-operative communications strategies may de-emphasise their unique character and importance therefore needs to also be considered.

Introduction and Background

Co-operatives have a distinct democratic structure, guiding principles, and identity that distinguish them from other business models (International Co-operative Alliance, 1995). A key difference between co-operatives and other business forms is that co-operatives aim to meet their members' needs and to maximise the overall benefits for their members (Limnios et al., 2018; Michelsen, 1994). Unlike investor-owned firms (IOFs), co-operatives' aims are not reducible to profit-maximisation (Juga & Juntunen, 2018; Mazzarol et al., 2011; Nilsson, 2001; Novkovic, 2012; Tuominen et al., 2013). Studies confirm that co-operative activities are based on doing things together, equality, self-help, and democracy (see, for example, Patmore & Balnave, 2018) and participating in the development of local communities (Vieta & Lionais, 2015).

Mazzarol et al. (2011) found that when consumer co-operatives operate in markets, prices can be driven down setting a basic price ceiling for products; thus, consumer co-operatives discipline markets against price-gouging (Spear, 2000). According to Novkovic (2008, p. 2173), "co-operatives buy locally produced goods at higher prices to ensure food safety, local development, and other goals" and "sell at reduced prices in low-income communities and offer many other examples of internalisation of community concerns into a co-operative business". In this way, supply and pricing decisions can be made taking account of co-operative social goals.

At an ideological level, co-operatives' special characteristics are generally recognised, and co-operatives are thought to have a strong value system. In practice, definition of these special characteristics is difficult (Nilsson, 2001; Puusa & Saastamoinen, 2021; Spear, 2004; Tuominen et al., 2010). Hence, co-operatives have suffered from identity and image problems, including the fact that their purpose is not well known, or is misunderstood (Skurnik, 2002). Moreover, co-operative members have been found to be ignorant of their ownership role — even if they use co-operative services regularly (Jussila et al., 2012).

The capitalist business culture has been deeply rooted in many societies with the limited company emerging as the dominant business form. People's ideas about ownership and entrepreneurship reflect the assumption that companies' purpose is to maximise shareholder profits (Puusa et al., 2013; Smith & Rönnegard, 2014). As Mooney & Gray (2002, p. 6) argue:

... the neoclassical economics model generally assumes competition among actors as the predominant relationship. Social relationships are assumed to be competitive with similar members of the environment and conflictual with dissimilar members although the languages of market power, rather than conflict are used.

According to Hind (1997), co-operatives defy traditional economic and management theories whereby companies' goals are revenue, growth, or maximising and optimising sales. For co-operatives, Hind argues, these goals are "either superfluous or act as constraints within which other member benefit goals may be aimed" (p. 1078). To illustrate this conflict between co-operative and dominant economic understandings, this study analyses press coverage of consumer price cuts driven by the Finnish consumer co-operative S Group. As its campaign became national news, it revealed the inadequacy of dominant news discourses to account for entrepreneurial diversity. Since journalism not only describes reality but also produces it (Karvonen, 2018), the study investigates how the purpose of co-operatives is represented, distorted, or neglected in Finnish media texts.

The Discursive Power of News Media

The role of journalism has traditionally been seen as objectively portraying social reality, and delivering factual information (McQuail, 2000). According to the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), respect for the facts and the public's right to truth define the journalist's role (2021, para 1). In addition, the IFJ (para 2) outlines that "in pursuance of this duty, the journalist shall at all times defend the principles of freedom in offering an honest collection and publication of news, and of the right of fair comment and criticism". The media's tasks are therefore seen as accurate accounting of daily news, acting as a forum for public and critical discussion, presenting an overall picture of various social groups, presenting and clarifying social values, and providing full access to the latest information (McQuail, 2000). Yet, as human beings, journalists can never be fully objective. Instead, journalistic methods are objective (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Beyond merely reporting facts, journalistic interpretation of facts helps construct reality (Karvonen, 2018). Viewpoints both presented and omitted shape news texts. Through their linguistic choices, the media shapes different versions of reality thus defining what perspective is heard and how reality is represented (Fairclough, 1995; 2015). This interpretive role confers a significant social responsibility on journalists.

Ward (2005) proposed a social contract for journalism based on the idea that "the public grants (or guarantees) certain freedoms and privileges to the press with the expectation that journalists will act responsibly, fulfil a range of functions and provide benefits" (Ward, 2005, p. 8). Furthermore, Ward (2005) argues that journalists should provide a comprehensive account, thus avoiding conflicts of interest. Additionally, the international ethical rules of journalism state that journalists should avoid distortion of facts, libel, and unfounded accusations and make sure they distinguish factual information from commentary and criticism (IFJ, 2021). Studies on financial and business journalism, however, question journalists' commitment to the public good (Davis, 2005; Starkman, 2009; Tambini, 2009). If business journalists tend to reflect investors' interest in stock prices rather than the greater public interest, then they may influence markets through selective content or by presenting the news at a specific time (Tambini, 2013).

Context of the Study

Most Finnish agricultural producers are members of co-operatives that supply and process agricultural raw materials. The largest companies in the Finnish food industry are thus mainly

owned by producer co-operatives. For example, Valio's share of raw milk supply in Finland is about 80% (Aravuori et al., 2019), and the joint share of meat supply by Atria and HKScan is 65% (Hannuksela, 2020). Therefore, compared to IOFs, food industry companies with a co-operative background have a majority market share.

All retail stores and food industry companies do business with each other, regardless of their ownership structure. There are three main businesses that dominate the retail sector in Finland: S group, K Group, and Lidl. S Group is a customer-owned network of companies in the retail and service sectors, with more than 1,800 outlets in Finland and the largest co-operative group in Finland. K Group, which has 1,007 stores in Finland, is a listed company with shares listed on Nasdaq Helsinki. Lidl, a German international discount retailer chain belonging to the Schwarz Group and the fifth biggest retailer in the world, has about 180 stores in Finland.

S Group's market share grew steadily between 2010 and 2014. At the same time Lidl grew strongly while K Group's market share fell slightly by 0.9 percentage points (Päivittäistavarakauppa ry, 2021). In 2015, S Group's share of Finnish retail trade was 45.96%, an increase of 0.2 percentage points from the previous year, while K Group's share was 32.7%, a decrease of 0.4 percentage points, and Lidl's 9.04%, a decrease of 0.2 percentage points.

The price-drop campaign

2015 was a time of intense price competition in the Finnish retail sector. S Group began cutting prices of daily consumer goods. This campaign was referred to as a price-drop or "halpuutus" in Finnish, which also coined a new term in the Finnish language. Half a year earlier, prices in the consumer retail business had also been cut by K Group.

On 18 January 2015, S Group announced price reductions. A TV advertisement used the price of milk as an example, which according to the story was more expensive for Finns than the price of a detached house. S Group described the reductions as a strategic decision that required streamlining operations and cutting costs due to the fact "Finns have considered the price of food too expensive" (S Group, 2015b). Additionally, in a press release (S Group, 2015a), Taavi Heikkilä, president and CEO of the group stated:

We are doing everything we can to make us the cheapest grocery store for Finns ... We have asked ... how we can best help ordinary Finns now that we are living in really difficult times ... The message is clear: the price of everyday food purchases must be brought down ... Our only purpose is to help ordinary Finns (paras 3-7).

Between 2015 and 2019, S Group reduced the prices of thousands of products more than a dozen times.

Research Methods

In total 27 articles published on cost-cutting in *Kauppalehti*, and 87 articles published in *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* during 2015 were analysed. *Kauppalehti* publishes general interest articles about financial and economic issues, while *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, Finland's second most read newspaper, identifies itself as a "rural defender" and advocate of the rural economy. *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* is politically non-aligned and a leading supporter of The Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners (MTK), an interest group representing farmers, forest owners, and rural entrepreneurs in Finland. With over 316,000 members in local agricultural producers' organisations and regional forest management associations, MTK's main aims are to lobby for agricultural and forest policy and promote rural entrepreneurship. MTK owns the Viestilehdet limited company which publishes the *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* newspaper.

Both *Kauppalehti* and *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* are well known, respected, and have wide circulation in Finland. In addition, we wanted to choose newspapers with different profiles. *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* is clearly profiled as a voice for the rural community and for producers.

Kauppalehti is more generic and its target group is managers, entrepreneurs and anyone who is interested in business and trade. Additionally, the choice of media was influenced by the fact that both newspapers are national whereas the majority of other major Finnish newspapers are regional.

Every newspaper published during the research period was browsed through *Kauppalehti*'s archive, as the archive cannot be searched. The articles were reviewed by looking through the headlines, subheadings, and images, resulting in identification of 27 articles. The archive of the *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* works with the use of a keyword search which allows one to search old editions at different levels while excluding search criteria. The keywords used in *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* were cheap* (see Note 1), SOK, and S Group. A total of 87 articles on the topic were found in *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*, 47 of which did not address the campaign. While the lack of search facility may have resulted in fewer articles being found in *Kauppalehti*'s archives, this is also likely to be explained by the different profile of the publications.

A discourse analytic approach was used to identify the discourses used to account for the price-drop campaign by S Group, including its motivations and the campaign's consequences, and the similarities and differences between the publications were compared. The analysis proceeded according to Fairclough's three-step process (2015, pp. 58-59) beginning with a review of the text, which word choices were used in the articles, and how the texts were constructed and meaning conveyed. In the second stage of the process, the discussants' discourses were interpreted. Finally, the analysis sought to explain the key findings and reveal which stories were being told, what arguments were emphasised, which viewpoints were canvassed, and which facts or viewpoints were overlooked or under-represented. In other words, the study analysed how the press framed S Group's campaign as meaningful.

Four actors and voices were identified from the articles in *Kauppalehti*: 1) S Group, 2) reporters/the media, 3) K Group (IOF), and 4) societal actors and experts. Similarly, the *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* articles highlighted four distinct actors: 1) S Group, 2) reporters/the media, 3) producers, and 4) the food industry. From the *Kauppalehti*'s articles, four discourses were identified: creating and maintaining competition; questioning of motives and implementation; equalising discourse; and discourse of the social actors. Four discourses were also found in articles in *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus*: creating and maintaining competition; questioning of motives and implementation; price formation; and discourse regarding food and food manufacturing inspired by the price-drop. Thus, the study found two predominant main discourses, which will be the focus of the key findings section. The first was a discourse of confrontation, primarily reflecting the competitive market context. The second discourse questioned the motives and the implementation of the price-drop campaign.

Key Findings

The discourse to create and maintain competition

The sub-themes of the discourse to create and maintain competition were divided into two categories: 1) building and maintaining confrontations through situational descriptions, and 2) building and maintaining confrontations by grouping actors into winners and losers, beneficiaries and victims. In both publications, situational descriptions and word choices construct and maintain the discussion of confrontations and competition in many ways. The discussion over the entire campaign intensified expressions to create confrontations, and competition; indicated by several texts where reporters/the media used pointed terms full of meaning to describe the studied phenomenon, such as "price war", "price race", "racing", "arms race", "sufferers", "victims", "distress", and "killing". For example, "A price war means the right prices ... There has been a fight" (Saario, 2015a); "The price race is getting tougher" (Kiuru, 2015); "S Group rushes into a price war" (Reku, 2015); "Low prices will cause trouble" (Nieminen, 2015); and "Will the price-drop kill the Finnish peasant?" (Pentikäinen, 2015).

In the second category, competition and confrontation were constructed and maintained by grouping actors into winners and losers, and beneficiaries and victims (payers): “Someone always has to pay for reduced prices, just like when prices go up” (Tammilehto, 2015b). In this debate, Finnish food producers were placed in the role of payer and are assumed to be unarmed in price negotiations. S Group was named the winner and beneficiary. This can be interpreted to mean that companies are expected to maximise profits and use stronger bargaining powers for selfish needs. The possibilities or benefits of co-operation in the food chain are not raised, even though this is one possible starting point in the co-operative system. Producers believed that lowering food prices is an underestimation of their work in a difficult economic situation, and they see S Group’s operations as an immoral attack, as reflected in the following extracts:

Agriculture is in danger of falling victim to a trade price war (Kivirinta, 2015).

Domestic food manufacturers ... have less bargaining power against trading companies than large suppliers when prices are distorted. If the store sells food to the consumer below production costs, the manufacturer will not be left with much afterwards (Tammilehto, 2015b).

Cheapening distorts competition and puts small food producers in a difficult situation (Tammilehto, 2015c).

These texts also set up confrontations between different retail groups (S Group, K Group, and Lidl), and the competition between them is regarded as an automatic starting point to ensure that market shares are maintained and increased. In other words, lower prices appear as a response to the intensified competition situation when the German Lidl entered the market. In the following extracts, the discourse did not reveal the starting point of the co-operative system for meeting the needs of its members:

Forecasting is not easy, but I expect that the triumph of Lidl will continue ... While nearly all other chains are in a slump, Lidl just keeps on going (Saario, 2015b).

People have started to consume products that have lower prices and prefer to buy discount products and own brands. The obvious winner is Lidl, as its success is based on low prices (Tammilehto, 2015a).

Interestingly, the publications ignored the price reductions previously made by K Group, while the confrontation between S Group and Lidl was highlighted. In this debate, Lidl is referred to in a highly positive light and S Group is branded a “bad boy”: “One is forgiven of his sins and the other — who is committed to price reductions — remains as the bad boy”; and K group “becomes a friend of the producers” (Tammilehto, 2015d).

In summary, the rhetoric used highlighted competition, and created confrontations. The basic principles of private ownership were visible in texts, claiming that a competitive situation was automatically the basis for business. Neither responsible business nor co-operation between actors were discussed. The business form and the co-operative system were not discussed at all in a discourse based on creating and maintaining competition.

The discourse of questioning of motives and implementation

The motives and implementation of the price decrease were identified as the second main discourse in the data. According to journalists, S Group’s price-drop campaign was a reaction to Lidl’s competitive challenge. The entry of Lidl into the Finnish market forced Finnish chains to lower their prices whereas previously the large Finnish chains had (artificially?) maintained (excessively?) high prices. According to journalists, lower prices attracted more consumers because of the economic collapse. Some texts even claimed that S Group had no other choice because it would otherwise have lost customers and a share of the market:

The retail chain (S Group) was simply forced to ... meet Lidl’s price challenge ... Lidl is the force for change in trade (Saario, 2015b).

It is noteworthy that none of the texts started with the assumption that this campaign should have anything to do with the co-operative's purpose, even after S Group justified the cuts with reference to co-operative principles (S Group, 2015a). Even though K Group started its price competition about six months earlier than S Group, albeit not as extensive as S Group's price-drop campaign, the media did not question their actions. The texts analysed suggest that S Group's price-drop campaign started as a reaction to increased price competition. They revealed journalists' suspicions of the selfish motives behind the price-drop campaign in order to increase sales, strengthen market share, and create profits:

S Group did not cut its prices just to be friendly. It decided to reduce prices to increase its sales. The goal is therefore to gain as much profit as before, preferably even more, and increase S Group's market share (Hallman, 2015).

The reason ... for the fall in prices is the defence of market share against German Lidl, which has become a serious challenger (Maaseudun Tulevaisuus, 2015a, para 5).

According to S Group's narrative, the motives for the price-drop campaign include the economic slump and the competitive situation vis-à-vis other retail groups. The debate is marked by a defensive tone, through which S Group seeks to correct the discourse in which it has been set as an oppressor of producers:

The share of trade in the price of food is not the same as the profit of trade ... the food industry negotiates prices with producers (Ala-Siurua & Holmberg, 2015).

Another motive for the price-drop was also identified: S Group's will to fulfil its basic mission, i.e., to work in the best interests of its customer-owners, and to support them during financially challenging times:

Basically, the advertising campaign is about implementing SOK's strategy, lowering the price of food in a situation where consumers' purchasing power has weakened (Torikka, 2015c).

During his term as CEO, Heikkilä has emphasised the idea of co-operatives, which do not aim for maximum profit, but the profit must end in the interests of the members (Tammilehto, 2015e).

In both publications, the journalists did not recognise that the purpose of the co-operative system was to offer its members maximum benefits instead of maximising profits. While representatives of S Group said this was a long-term strategic action based on the basic purpose of the business, according to journalists, it was a short-term marketing campaign. The journalists strongly questioned S Group's messaging about how S Group could cover the costs of the price-drop campaign with lower profit margins and by improving effectiveness. They also speculated about who would have to pay the bill:

S Group announced ... lower prices. This is of course good news, but we must keep in mind that this is not about charity... S Group probably won't be cutting their margins. The industry, producers and other stakeholder groups will face pressure (Pesonen, 2015).

The price-drop campaign launched in the daily consumer goods trade at the beginning of the year is not a fixed-term discount scheme, but a permanent strategic choice (News Manager, 2015).

In other words, the journalists questioned and doubted the idea that consumers would benefit from lower prices.

Like the journalists, K Group also questioned S Group's motives, but this discourse had a different meaning in part. K Group stressed its own sustainability and co-operation with producers, emphasising actions through which it works with producers, while S Group's price reductions were considered irresponsible:

(K Group) announced a new "Thanking the producers" campaign ... customers can pay one extra euro for Finnish Christmas ham, which goes directly to the producer. And K Group pays a second extra euro for ham, so the producer gets two euros which is eight per cent of the price (Tammilehto 2015d).

S Group as a follower of K Group, or even a copy-cat was especially emphasised in articles in *Kauppalehti*. The price-drop campaign was deemed a skilful but intentional marketing stunt, and its motive was to follow K Group's actions and/or create profits:

K Group continues to lower its prices ... We will not start any head-to-head battle with our competitor; instead, we have already taken significant action to lower our prices. It rather seems that S Group has followed our lead (Mikko Helander, CEO of K group cited in Tammilehto, 2015a).

To summarise, it appears that in many comments made by representatives of K Group, the price-drop campaign was judged without paying any attention to the differences in the business forms. Like the journalists, K Group representatives saw the price-drop campaign as an intentional, and even questionable marketing stunt. The source texts used in the analysis contained the implicit and inbuilt assumption that the purpose of business was to maximise profits. The financial results and possible changes in market shares for both companies were also reported. It is interesting that no attention was paid to why the profits of S Group seemed to be improving, or why the profits seemed more positive than those of K Group. The differences between the two business forms were ignored. For example, the fact that the co-operative's system is based on its members and its purpose is to offer them as many advantages as possible may have resulted in price reductions which then attracted co-operative members and encouraged them to use the services more widely. As stated above, journalists were suspicious of the price-drop campaign and the actions of S Group. They questioned the nature of the campaign, its timing, motives, execution, and length. Moreover, they questioned S Group's arguments for price cutting on a co-operative basis.

Finnish producers considered S Group's price-drop and its advertising to have undervalued their work. From their point of view, the aim of S Group's price-drop campaign was to criticise the high price of Finnish food and production costs: "Marketing is perceived to denigrate Finnish food" (Torikka, 2015b). According to the producers, S Group's advertising tried to create the impression that cheap food was the goal. The marketing campaign was seen as a severe blow to the producers' values and food appreciation:

The boundary conditions of food produced in Finland must be remembered, and it must never be turned into a cheap brand (Lehtinen & Kiviranta, 2015).

During this campaign, producers called for co-operation between the various players in the food chain and felt that S Group's price-drop and the associated marketing campaign were not conducive to co-operation and threatened producers' livelihoods. The success of Finnish food production in the market was perceived as impossible in a situation where S Group lowered its prices:

Trade, industry, and farmers in the food chain drink from the same cup. The chain will not survive if one drinks the cup empty and the others lose their share. Instead of trust, bitterness and mutual blame arise. Co-operation, openness and better mutual understanding can ensure the preservation of high-quality food production, even in difficult times. It is worth moving from cheap to fair (Maaseudun Tulevaisuus, 2015b, paras 17-18).

It is very important to make sure that the Finnish consumer wants domestic food. She/he wants domestic food to be tasty, healthy, and reasonably priced, and to have a good image. Instead of being degraded, appreciation is required now (Pietikäinen, 2015).

Co-operatives and S Group's principles and values were called into question by producers. Reductions in food prices were perceived to be contrary to the principles, as producers felt that they had to pay for the discounts: "They (price-drops) show that the co-operative principles have been forgotten" (Torikka, 2015a). As a result, "many producers have cut their S Group's bonus card [a symbol of the ownership of a co-operative] in half" (Torikka, 2015a).

S Group defended itself against K Group and the producers' questioning of the permanence, consistency, and co-operative impact of the price-drop campaign. The texts analysed emphasise that this was not a single short-term scheme, but a strategic choice related to

the form of business and implemented by means of long-term work and improved efficiency, together with a sense of community and, therefore, co-operation between different members of the Group:

Reducing costs is made possible by cutting costs in marketing, and in administrative and IT costs. For example, energy costs were cut by almost 10% last year (Pilkama, 2015, para 4).

We are streamlining our own operations by EUR 60 million annually, says the CEO (Viitala, 2015).

Also indicated by the descriptions is the under-reported fact that S-Group is owned by its members. The assessment of the impact of the price-drop campaign and profits thus raises the idea of duality in the co-operative system. S Group is the market leader, which operates profitably while fulfilling its basic mission to serve its co-operative members: "... seeking the highest possible profit is not part of the co-operative system" (Tammilehto, 2015e).

A co-operative differs from an enterprise owned by its shareholders in that co-operative members invest by using services instead of making capital investments. The increased use of services increases the sales volume of the co-operative, and co-operative members are rewarded for their use of services in accordance with the principles of the co-operative. This partly explains why reduced prices can produce business benefits in the co-operative system.

To sum up, the reasons given by S Group for the price reduction (supporting customers in difficult economic times) were called into question. Instead, the voices of the journalists in the discussions argued that S Group's motives were selfish and that the price reductions were seen as an attempt to maintain/increase their share of the market. The journalists also questioned the long-term nature of the price cuts. The voices of K group and the producers also came to the fore in the debate. K Group criticised S Group for copying its own operations and considered price reductions to be a marketing ploy. The discourse put forward by the producers directly accused S group of undervaluing the producers. They strongly questioned that price reductions would be recovered by S Group's own operations and blamed them for covering for discounts by paying less to producers.

Conclusions

It can be concluded that in the media and articles reviewed, there was little evidence of knowledge or appreciation of a co-operative as a specific business form or acknowledging differences between organisational forms or purposes in general. This is evident in the description of the price-drop campaign which was seen merely as a marketing campaign to maintain and/or increase S Group's market share. Price reductions were believed to be a temporary step paid for by lowering producer prices.

Based on our analysis, it appears as if the articles did not seem to believe the claims made by the price-drop campaign's launcher about the underlying motives and purpose of the co-operative, questioning or even ignoring such claims. This became clear, for example, in conversations on whether the campaign was based on selfish motives, or a long-term strategic trend related to the purpose and task of the co-operative's activities. This finding is not surprising for *Maaseudun Tulevaisuus* as it can be assumed that its perspective favours producers. Yet, it is noteworthy that the discourse surrounding S Group's price-drop created a competitive situation and the activities of S Group were also questioned in *Kauppalehti*. It should be noted, however, that by emphasising prices in its information and advertising, S Group repeatedly formulated its own role throughout the campaign, emphasised by the creation of a new word for the phenomenon. Although S Group claimed that co-operative principles were behind the fall in prices, it should have considered the need to provide a more detailed justification for such action.

Awareness of co-operatives and the co-operative idea is generally poor in Finland (Puusa, et al., 2016; Puusa et al., 2013). S Group did not emphasise strongly enough their co-operative mission or their attempt to serve their membership. Rather, S Group's language can be seen

as a strategy adapted to the hegemony of capitalist business norms rather than highlighting the principles and dual nature of co-operatives (Novkovic et al., 2022). While it is surprising that S Group's communication is strongly identified with capitalist business language and focused on transactional relationships with consumers, co-operatives face pressure to use capitalist business logic, even when it has been found to jeopardise the realisation of their original purpose and cause a deterioration of identity. Thus, such a communication strategy can be self-defeating because it presents co-operatives as indistinguishable from other forms of enterprise.

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that as organisations develop and establish their position in a given industry, they begin to lose their distinctive identity and thus resemble other operators (see also Cornforth et al., 1988; Mazzarol et al., 2011; Nilsson, 2001; Puusa et al., 2016; Puusa et al., 2013). According to DiMaggio and Powell this institutional isomorphism is due to several reasons. For example, professional managers go through an education dominated by business logic and principles adopted from the IOF world and approached via neoclassical economics. Isomorphic pressures also originate from public authorities and the perceived legitimacy of various business models. The findings show the significant influence of principles of private ownership and profit maximisation as the main purpose of businesses (Fontrodona & Sison, 2006; Nilsson, 2001; Novkovic, 2012; Puusa & Saastamoinen, 2021). Thus, differences between various business forms were not recognised, and S Group could not communicate these clearly. Instead, these discourses failed to distinguish between distinct forms of business in the retail commerce sector. Similarly, no distinctions were made between businesses with different tasks or their historical and current significance for the economy, culture, society, or politics. The ignorance in the articles analysed was surprising. The effect of co-operatives at the national level was clearly not known. For example, the texts did not recognise the co-operative system as the force for national welfare that it is, based on history, financial statistics, and studies. Consequently, we suggest newsroom reforms and journalism education that acknowledge the characteristics and purposes of different business forms would yield more meaningful representations of economic and social reality.

To sum up, in the light of the results of this present study, it can be said that journalistic accounts interpreted as suspicious or even biased can largely be explained by the dominant status of private ownership in our society. Co-operatives constitute a somewhat unknown system and they do not sufficiently highlight the ultimate purpose of their form of enterprise. In journalism, however, being unfamiliar with a phenomenon should not prevent editors and reporters from fact checking. Ignorance is no excuse to leave the matter obscure when it is presented (Ward 2005; IFJ 2021). As highlighted above, school of journalism and in-service instruction in economic pluralism, including co-operative education, could also advance journalism's professional commitment to truth-seeking and democratic self-governance. Finally, the question may also be asked whether co-operatives have provided adequate information in accordance with Principle 5: to "inform the general public — particularly young people and opinion leaders — about the nature and benefits of co-operation" (ICA, 2018, para 11).

The Authors

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Note

- 1 cheap* denotes a 'wildcard' search and is generally used to find multiple endings e.g. cheap, cheapen, cheapening, cheaper, cheapened.

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