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Authors: Lilly Korpiola, Petro Poutanen
Project manager: Giorgio Bertolin
Design: Kārlis Ulmanis

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NATO STRATCOM COE
11b Kalnciema iela
Riga LV1048, Latvia
www.stratcomcoe.org
Facebook/stratcomcoe
Twitter: @stratcomcoe

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Abstract

This study examines the evolution of the “Mask Gate” media event that took place in Finland amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and state of emergency in 2020. In March-August 2020, there was a dispute between various public health institutions and authorities as to whether the public should be required to use face masks. This investigation focuses on the construction of the media event, specifically on the interplay and dynamics between social media and mass media, as well as the public reactions evoked by the Mask Gate in Finland. Our aim is to describe the critical turning points in the development of the media event, thus tracing the evolution of such media events in the present media system. We illustrate our

case with the help of a data set consisting of 391 033 messages about respiratory masks found on social media and traditional news media outlets. We focus our analysis on a subset of this data set concerning the “Mask Gate”. On the basis of our analysis, we present a timeline of the Mask Gate as well as analyse the most important actors, platforms and affective reactions that played a role in the construction of the event. An autopsy of such a notable media event can assist organisations in developing their communication competencies for risk, strategic and crisis communication situations, in which it is imperative for an organisation to restore its public legitimacy.



Introduction

On April 8th 2020, Finnish weekly *Suomen Kuvalehti* had a scoop claiming that the Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency had purchased face masks via two Finnish agents worth a combined 10 million euros (Liski, 2020). The procured Chinese masks appeared to be unsuitable for hospital use due to their low quality. According to the report, partners of the deal were a businessman who ran a quick-loans company before running heavily into debt, a beauty-sector entrepreneur and a convicted white-collar criminal (Yle News, 2020).

Due to the public outcry regarding this failed deal, the Finnish government accepted the resignation of the head of the Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency. The failed face mask deal raised questions about the organisation's competence and resilience, igniting a public legitimacy crisis for the respective institutions. Later on in October of 2020, opposition politicians accused the government of providing misleading information concerning the effectiveness of masks in the spring, when the Prime Minister said that the shortage of masks was one of the reasons for not giving a large-scale recommendation for using masks (Vaarala & Koivuranta, 2020). This event reinvigorated the debate and Mask Gate reappeared in the media. Thus, the failed deal can be conceived of as only as the starting point for an extensive public debate and political struggle that revolved around the subject of masks.

This study is aimed at unpacking and analysing the construction of the media event, specifically on the interplay and dynamics between social media and mass

media and the public reactions evoked by Mask Gate in Finland. Our aim is to describe the important turning points along the emergence and development of this media event. By understanding the construction of a media event in a hybrid media space, we can learn more about how such media events may influence the public understanding and interpretation of the events. This is especially important in times of societal crises, when the sense of psychological security is at stake, necessitating access to the best evidence-based information.

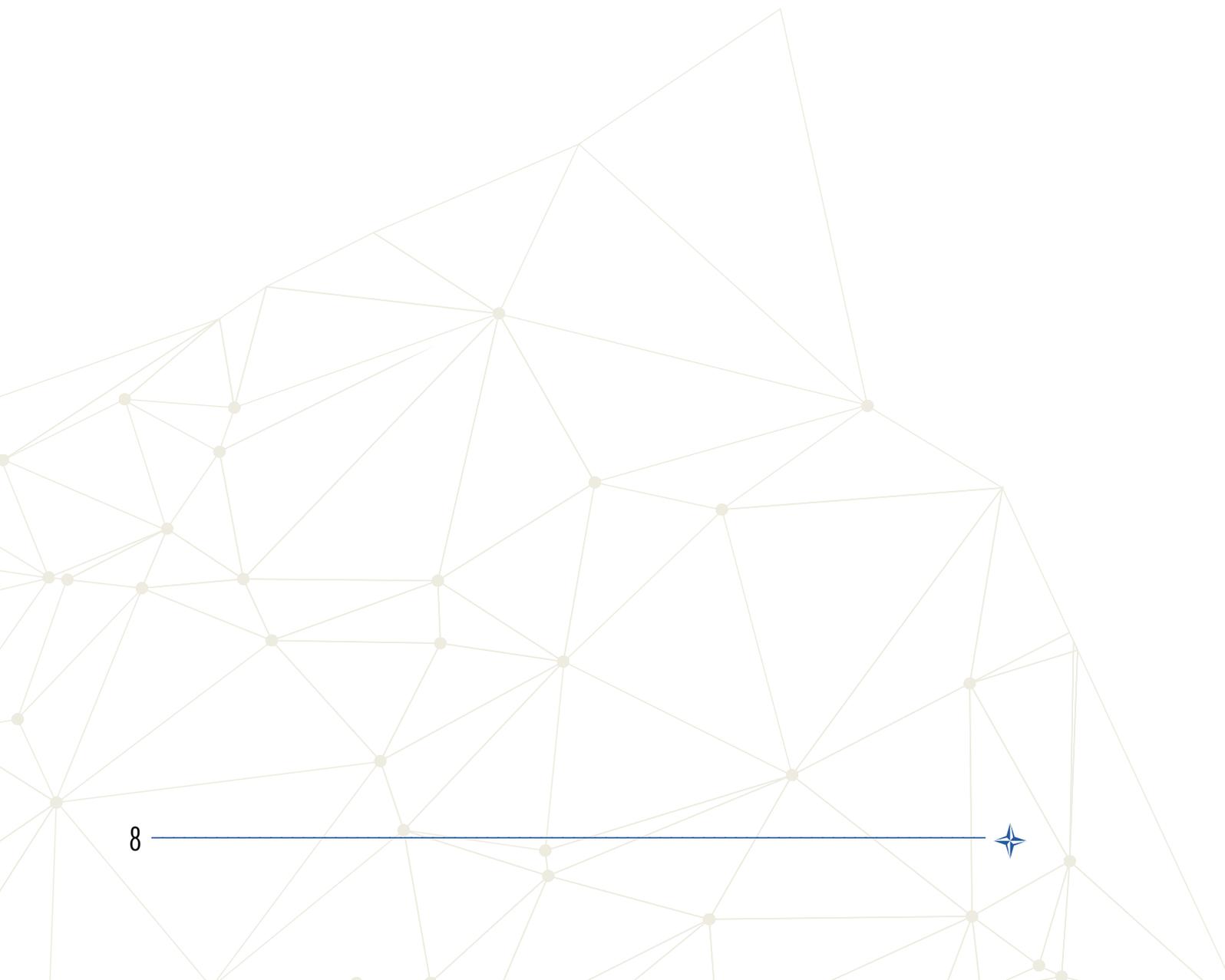
The motivation for studying this debate is twofold: First, it is important to understand how such a media event evolved in the current media system. Mask gate was caused because of apparent failures in the face mask acquisition process, and the ensuing political debate concerning the accusations of misleading information can be seen as the aftermath and next phase of the mask acquisition scandal. An autopsy of such a huge media event can assist organisations in developing their communication competencies for risk and



crisis communication situations, in which it is imperative for an organisation to restore its public legitimacy and curb mis- and disinformation. Moreover, we focus on the role of mediated emotions in driving the event and discussion. It is important to understand how mediated emotions, such as “moral panics”, can escalate and how the sense of psychological security can be distorted (e.g. Kellner 2003; Cottle 2006, Döveling, Harju & Sommer, 2018).

Second, we need more knowledge on the role of social media and the interplay of

social and traditional media in the digital sphere. We have significant data points available through media monitoring systems on media events, but we remain limited in our understanding of their social construction and the role of public audiences in this process. This remains the case, even though these events have a major impact on our society through their ability to adjust opinions, diffuse information widely, and influence people’s mood and perceptions, as well as trust in public institutions critical for the functioning and integrity of democratic systems.



Literature review

Media events

Since the publication of 'Daniel Dayan's and Elihu Katz's (1992) seminal work *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, the notion of media events has sparked a lively academic debate for 30 years. In their ground-breaking study Dayan and Katz introduced the concept of a *media event*, which is now among the established theories in the field of media studies.

In the 1990s, online media did not yet exist. Politics and power were displayed in the broadcast media, radio and press. Dayan and Katz identified three subgroups of media events: coronations, contests, and conquests – all important enough to interrupt the everyday broadcast schedule. They were monopolistic, pre-planned and live, effectively capturing attention and fixing all eyes to the ceremonial centre of society. Dayan and Katz understood the significance of media events in terms of their power to communicate symbols, reinforcing fundamental values, sense of unity and social cohesion, in addition to inviting the audience to participate in the event (Daniel & Katz, 1992, 5–9). These classical media events were ceremonial co-productions between the establishment and the broadcasters.

The power of this theory lies in its understanding of collective human behaviour, focusing on people's yearning for togetherness and desire to participate in special occasions of societies' history (Couldry et al. 2010). Later, academic criticism focused on the limitations of this theory, such as its lack of research on traumatic or disruptive media events, such as wars and terror attacks, and especially regarding its neglect of the transformation of the current global, digital and online media environment (Cottle 2006; Dayan 2010; Hepp & Couldry 2010; Sumiala & Korpiola, 2016, 2017).

Dayan and Katz responded to critics, suggesting that the focus of analysis should be shifted from unifying media events to disruptive events, such as disasters, terror attacks, wars, uprisings, and revolutions (Katz & Liebes 2007, 2010). These unexpected "mediatised disasters" were not reducing splintering but rather exacerbating divides across society (Cottle 2006; Liebes 1998; Liebes and Blondheim 2005).

In recent years, following the development of social media and global online media environment, the scholarly debate has shifted towards the aspect of hybridity of media events. As Sumiala et al. (2016, 2018) have posited, in the current global



media landscape, media events are hybrid in the sense that they are constructed in a complex interplay between different human actors, individuals and collectives, such as institutions and organisations, besides non-human actors, i.e., technologies, algorithms and media platforms. In contrast to the classical and pre-staged ceremonial media events where the information flow was controlled and the event was carefully scripted, hybrid media events are characterised by uncontrolled information flows and circulation of media content, which different actors can further exploit and leverage to influence public discourse (ibid.). Hybrid media events are seen to be concurrently consolidating social cohesion among certain segments of society, while causing disruption in other groups and therefore fomenting polarisation and disagreement in society.

An important contribution to the literature on media events was made by Tal Morse (2014), when he introduced the idea of discontinuation of a media event. Morse pointed out that even though some media coverage of war could not be considered as media events in the strictest sense of the concept, it did, however, share the same functionalities in terms of summoning large audiences and eliciting their attention to a major event outside of the media. Morse refers to those events as *asynchronous continuous media events*. They are events in which the war continues, but the converges discontinues. The media maintains the suspense of the story by constructing

expeditions for the future, stressing a moral implication to stay tuned, thickening the plot, or using other means to keep audience following the story (ibid., 134-135).

The important difference between these and classical media events is that continuous asynchronous events are not transmitted live following the pre-planned media schedule, but they are covered extensively within the regular news and by a notable number of media organisations. However, these stories invite spectators to participate in the event by following the news (Morse 2014, 160).

In classical media events, participation entails passive spectatorship, whereas in hybrid media events it represents active participation, enabled by citizen journalism and social media platforms, among other factors. Consequently, media events can be seen in the age of hybrid media as complex and extended spectacles consisting of a sequence of different episodes and plot twists, as well as loci of discontinuation.

A Hybrid media system

The information environment and the nature of communications has changed radically in the last 20 years due to the emergence of digital online media. The digitalised media environment has become more and more complex and intertwined. In this media environment, content circulates from one media channel to another, including



” Virtually anyone with the resources and capability to simply go online has, in theory, an opportunity to participate and shape the debate in line with their own agenda.

between traditional and social media. This current information environment is referred to, academically, as the *hybrid media system* (Chadwick, 2013). In a hybrid media system, different media outlets and channels, communication styles, media logics and actors are mixed together (ibid.).

With respect to its academic grounding and positioning, this study contributes to the discussion of the hybrid media system, as well as to the dynamics and interplay between old and new media (Chadwick, 2013; Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Digital media has revolutionised the field of strategic communications, creating new challenges and risks for organisations (Laaksonen 2016, 2017; Macnamara & Zerfass 2012).

The total and comprehensive management of public discussion has become an obsolete ideal. People, organisations, and technologies are actors in a digital sphere, where traditional media channels and outlets still exist and retain significant gatekeeper and broadcasting power. However, this influence is nowadays

more widely diffused among other actors. The so-called influencers, with their own followers and audiences, are able to harness power not unlike that harnessed by journalists, exclusively, for many decades. Virtually anyone with the resources and capability to simply go online has, in theory, an opportunity to participate and shape the debate in line with their own agenda. The public discourse has become more diversified and is certainly not only influenced by the traditional media alone.

The scale and impact of the change has been greater than communication researchers could have predicted fifteen years ago: the increased hybridity and complexity of media formats (Chadwick 2013; Albright 2017; Van Aelst et al. 2017) make the structure of publicity more complex. Communication is messy, and it inherently involves risks and leads to unpredictable consequences. All this has contributed to the change in the public status of institutions and experts. This challenges the authority and legitimacy of public officers and experts, especially in relation to new media. At the same time, disinformation, misinformation, and rumors



compete with official communication for public attention (e.g. Woolley & Howard 2019).

To understand the difference between the old and new media environments, two media logics can be differentiated: mass media logic and network media logic. According to Vesa & et al. (2020), these logics are related to the various modes and mechanisms of content production, flow, and usage. These logics are interrelated and coexist in a hybrid media system (ibid). For example, according to the mass media logic, content is produced by professionals and distributed from the few to the many via mass media channels. The audience's role here is that of passive content consumers. According to the network media logic, the audience and producers can be the same, when content is produced, curated, redistributed, framed, remixed, etc. actively by audiences. Moreover, the audience is not seen as a large mass media audience, but a social network of people organised around different thematic topics, for instance. The active audience participates and produces its own content as well as elicits emotional reactions to the content, thereby granting their vote to what will be popular.

A lot has been written about the affective role of digital media and mediated emotions (e.g. Ahmed 2004, Papacharissi 2015; & Döveling et al, 2018). It is often claimed that digital media drives emotional and affective forms of communication, and forces the traditional media to follow in their attempt

to persuade audiences and survive in the new media market conditions. However, the affective economy is a much older phenomenon, and the traditional media has long used affective content for persuasion. On the other hand, the logic of algorithms, whose function is to recommend popular content, may also boost the amount of affective and emotionally triggering content.

Therefore, public debates, sensations, and scandals, loaded with emotionally triggering subjects/material, could lend themselves to effective proliferation. That is why phenomena, such as Mask Gate, garner attention so easily: they are emotionally loaded, concern everybody, and have a lot of news criteria within them, and everyone in principle has the tools available to shape the debate according to their taste. All of this may have an impact on how information, as well as mis- and disinformation spread, and how recommendations for taking certain actions are received by people. It may have an influence on the legitimacy and operational performance of the public organisation, causing a lack of trust between different societal actors.

Based on the respective discussion, we present the following research questions: How did Mask Gate evolve as a media event?, What actors and platforms were producing acceleration and attention in the media event? And what role do affective reactions play in the construction of the media event?



Data and methodology

Data

In our original dataset, we gathered 391,033 messages from different social media and traditional journalistic media outlets on digital channels. The data was mined from the period of January 1st, 2020 to December 31st, 2020. The data set consists of social media messages (tweets and social media posts from various services), news articles and blog posts, and comments on them. This dataset consisted of all messages that included the keywords *maski** (mask) and *hengityssuoja** (respirator mask). From this data set we extracted messages explicitly referencing the mask scandal. The key words we used were: **maskigate** (maskgate), **maskikaup** (mask acquisition), **maskikohu** (mask scandal). The emergent data set consisted of 14 327 messages. Only messages that either explicitly included at least one of the key words or, in the case of social media, messages that linked to content including in its headline or lead paragraph at least one of the keywords, were incorporated into the data set. The data were acquired from a media monitoring company specialised in data mining from digital channels.

In the filtered data set, most of the messages are from the social media platform Twitter (82,1 % of the messages),

whereas the second biggest sources are *Ilta-Sanomat* (5,7 %), *Ilta-lehti* (3,5 %), *Helsingin Sanomat* (1,1 %), *Yle* (0,7 %), and *Uusi-Suomi Blogit* (0,6 %). Altogether, the data consisted of 119 different media sources, although the aforementioned channels already cover 94 % of the whole data. The data comprehensively represents the public digital sources of information and media across Finland. However, social media platforms, such as Facebook, do not enable data mining in a similar fashion as Twitter. For this reason, the data set should be considered as a sample of messages including one or more of the respective keywords. It is therefore possible that a lot of relevant material in closed information arenas, such as Facebook groups, telegram channels, or WhatsApp groups, is omitted.

According to the Official Statistics of Finland (OSF, 2020), 13 % of the Finnish population aged 16-89 followed Twitter during the last three months of 2020, whereas 58 % said that they follow Facebook, and 39 % follow Instagram. This means that Twitter is a medium for selective users and audiences. In Finland, Twitter has a special place in the social media ecosystem: it is widely used by politicians, experts, influencers, officials, and journalists in Finland. Indeed, most public debates are discussed on Twitter, rendering it a particularly relevant source to





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study, for example, elite networks in Finland (e.g. Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019).

According to Media Audit Finland (2020), *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Iltalehti* are the most popular tabloid magazines in Finland, and their average weekly online reach is about 2.8 million readers. This is a fairly good track record in a country with a total population of 5.5 million.

Because of the structure of our data set, we will focus on comparing different types of posts: social media messages (mostly tweets) and reader comment boards (i.e. “comments”) on news stories. This enables us to analyse the peaks of the discussion, i.e. how the “gate” forms. In the context of our data set, the most important of those arenas are Twitter and *Ilta-Sanomat* ja *Iltalehti*, with their comment boards.

Methodology

We divided our analysis into two different parts: First, we analysed what were the

most popular social media messages and news articles on the basis of their like and share counts. The data set included the like and share counts of each message and the amount of comments per news article at the time of obtaining the data in September 2021. We use these metrics as measures for popularity. We also utilised the sentiment analysis method to analyse the sentiments of the message contents. The used classification is based on FinnSentiment, a Finnish social media database for sentiment polarity annotation (Lindén, Jauhiainen & Hardwick, 2020).

Second, based on the findings of the previous phase and materials from news media articles, we created a timeline of Mask Gate. Then we used the framework of “the five A’s” (Sumiala et al, 2018) to explain the media event and understand its dynamics.

In order to understand the dynamics of media events in the current global hybrid media system, we need to identify and map different elements. In this study, we use



a classification developed by Sumiala et al (2008), which is composed of five main elements:

- **Actors. There are multiple** actors who create the event in the current media environment. They can be human or non-human (Latour 2005). Human actors can be individuals or a collective. Non-human actors are platforms, algorithms, AI, etc. In traditional media events, the central role was played by journalistic mainstream media, politicians and officials. Now anyone (an individual or collective) can influence the media event by mass communication (Castell 2009). These different actors are interconnected and networked by the hybrid media system.
- **Affordances.** Different media platforms operate as affordances and sociotechnical properties in a media flow. They provide opportunities for action, interaction and influence, in addition to acting as an interface for social engagement.
- **Attention.** Attention is contested, and in the current media milieu, different platforms create a “social awareness system” (e.g. Papacharissi 2015) where anyone can engage and participate via clicks, likes, hashtags, tagging and shares. The business logic of media platforms utilises the element of

attention in their revenue generation models. As such, attention is the motivating power, or the “fuel” that draws people’s ‘minds and hearts’ to different issues and news stories, thus creating a media event.

- **Affection.** Affection captures the intensity of drive or movement with a not yet developed sense of direction, as Papacharissi (2015) notes. Affection accumulates and directs the public attention. The affection element offers an opportunity to study how *shared emotions* bring different audiences and publics together and nurture their sense of shared community around and particular issue, scandal or a media event.
- **Acceleration.** Affections lead to the next thing which is the acceleration of the event.

This approach helps us point to important actors and events along the trajectory of the case. A timeline was constructed to illustrate an ongoing and protracted media event that took different narrative turns and episodes. The ensuing data analysis enabled us to identify both important actors and peaks in the debate. The five elements and the timeline will be presented in the following section.



Results

In this section, we answer our proposed research questions. First, we address the question of “How Mask Gate evolved as a media event?” In this respect, we present the timeline of the media event and the main points of escalation and developmental phases. Second, we elaborate on “What actors and platforms were producing acceleration and attention in the media event?”, and finally we discuss “What role do affective reactions play in the construction of the media event?”.

How did mask gate evolve as a media event?

In Table 1, the timeline of the media event is depicted, as well as main episodes and phases. There was a simultaneous

circulation of messages, videos and images across multiple platforms and by multiple actors. The media event accelerated very fast in the first phase when the magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* revealed the ambiguities related to the mask deals.

Table 1. Timeline of the media event (based on news sources and constructed timelines of YLE (Happo, 2020) and MTV3 (2020)).

Date	Event
March 13. 2020	The Government and the President declared that Finland is in a state of emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic and decided to adopt the Emergency Powers Act.
April 3. 2020	Finnish Institute of Occupational Health and FIMEA claimed that “Self-made masks do not protect against the virus, and at worst cause harm.”
April 14. 2020	Message from the CEO of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Wear a cloth mask in public places.
April 14. 2020	Ministry of Social affairs and Health claim that they “do not provide a mask recommendation.”
May 5. 2020	The Finnish Broadcasting Company: “Face masks mandatory in more than 50 countries - why not in Finland?”
May 5. 2020	Ministry of Social affairs and Health’s Chief of Staff in A-Studio: “We will find out the benefits of masks.”
May 14. 2020	Technical Research Centre of Finland: “The fabric mask may protect others, but not the user.”



Date	Event
May 22. 2020	The Finnish Broadcasting Company: Opposition to support the mask recommendation.
May 29. 2020	Ministry of Social affairs and Health's report explains: The benefits of masks in everyday life are small or non-existent.
June 2. 2020	The government's science panel disagrees - recommends the use of face masks in its report.
June 3. 2020	Minister Krista Kiuru: There is no general mask recommendation from the government, but a protector can be used to protect others
July 31. 2020	A new, external study of Ministry of Social affairs and Health's data: Masks do bring health benefits.
Aug 13. 2020	Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare: Mask recommendation for almost the whole country; PM Marin announces government support.
Sep 24. 2020	The Face Mask recommendation is updated.
Oct 8. 2020	PM Marin says at a government question and answer session that a mask recommendation was not issued in the spring because there were not enough masks available.
Oct 9. 2020	Minister Kiuru defends the government's recommendations in the spring by "the uncertainty of the situation".
Oct 11. 2020	PM Marin tweets about Mask Gate and denies allegations of lying and misleading the Finnish people.
Oct 12–14. 2020	Intensive public debate between Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and Ministry of Social affairs and Health, both on traditional and social media.
Oct. 15. 2020	PM Marin reports to the media that the debate is now closed.

Mask Gate was not a one-off event or social media flare-up, but rather an extended and *continuous media event* that took place over a period of six months. It had several episodes of accelerated media attention and clearly defined moments of escalation. When the news of the failed mask deal broke out, the first peak of attention occurred. The next acceleration of the media event happened when the officials provided contradictory information on the necessity of facial mask

use. The next acceleration happened when the contradicting investigation results concerning mask effectiveness in pandemic prevention were reported, based on the publications of the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the governmental science panel. The third acceleration took place in August, when it was announced that a mask recommendation would be given by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare before the school year began in Finland.



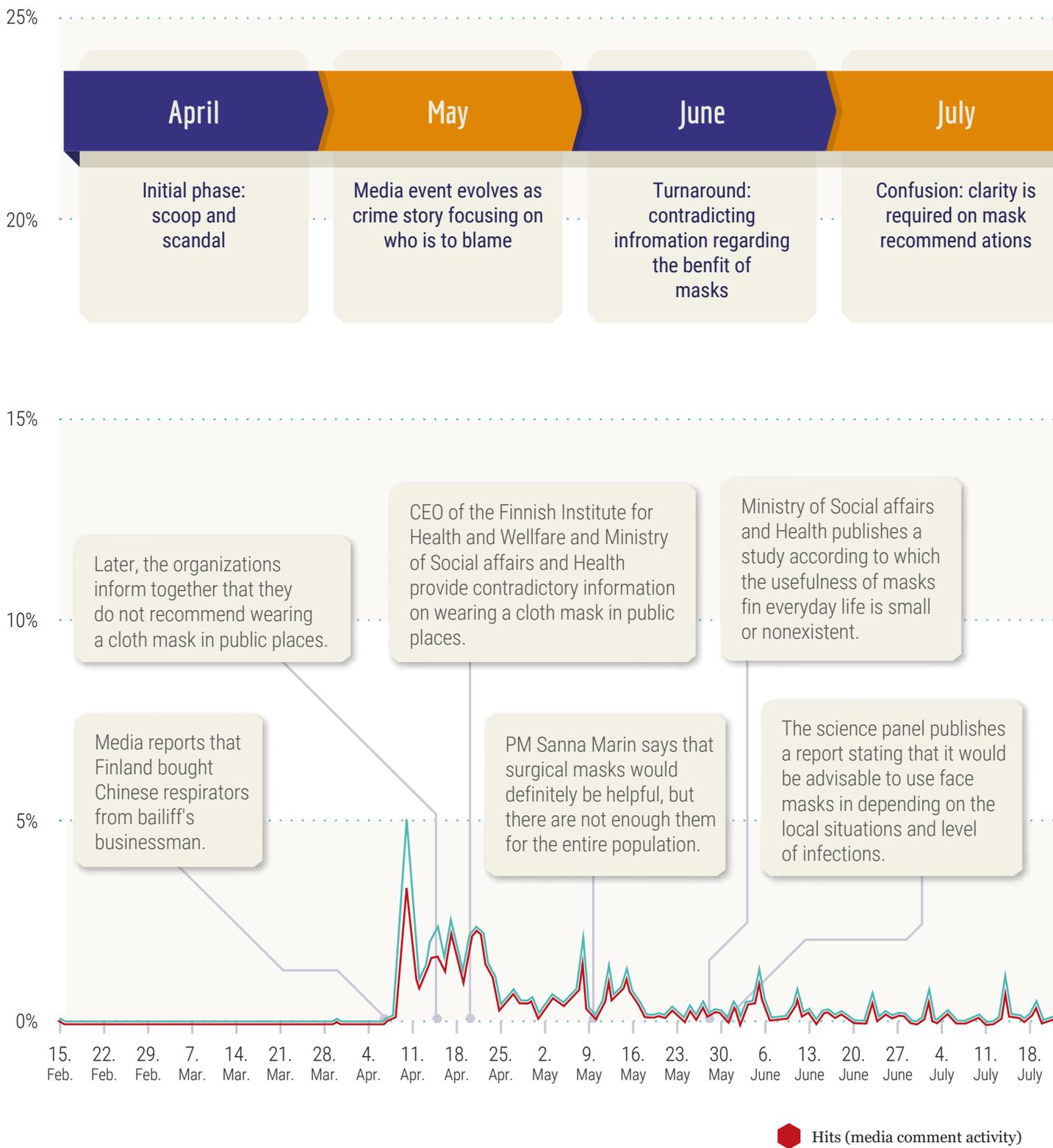


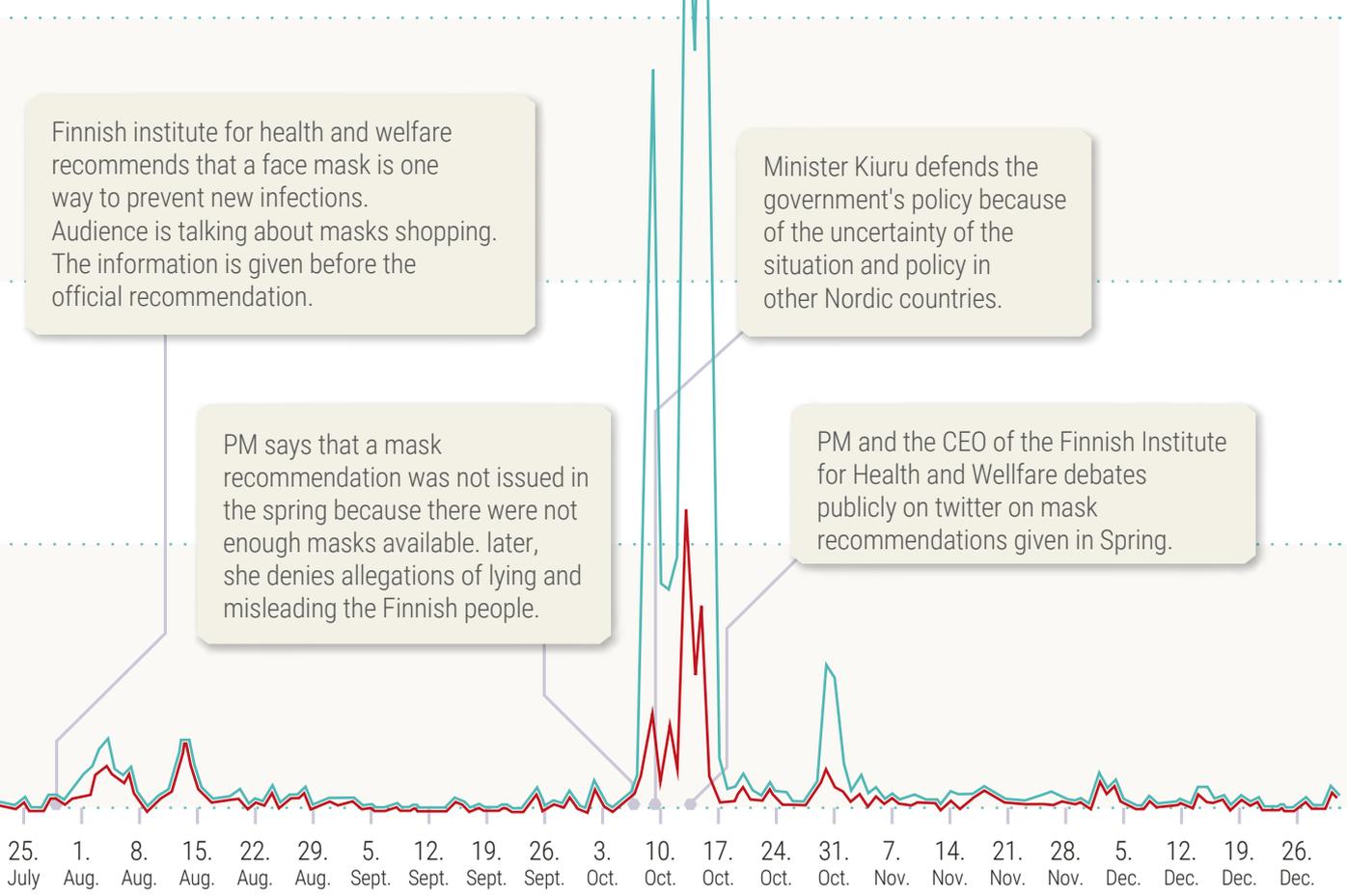
Fig. 1. The timeline of main events in the mask gate and their connections with the key elements of the media event. The graph presents proportions of





August **September** **October** **November/December**

Second turnaround: Masks are recommended Calm before the storm High point of escalation Resolving the conflict



Hits (social media activity)

daily social media and comment board messages.



People started acquiring masks and discussing them on social media. The fourth major escalation occurred when the Prime Minister stated during the government question-and-answer session in parliament, that the mask recommendation was not given in the spring of 2020 because there were not enough masks available. This led to the flare up of a scandal on social media; for instance, a former managing director and ex-parliamentarian as well as opposition politicians accused the government and officials for lying. At this point, a great deal of discussion took place on social media, especially on Twitter, with politicians and officials participating themselves. The uproar faded away when the PM informed the media that they have agreed on the issue with the CEO of the Finnish institute for Health and Welfare (see: Figure 1).

What actors and platforms were producing acceleration and attention in the media event?

Second, we ask “What actors and platforms were producing acceleration and attention in the media event?” According to Castells (2009, 416), power is primarily exercised by the construction of meaning in the human mind through processes of communication enacted in global/local multimedia networks of mass communication, including mass self-communication. Twitter and other social media platforms provide an opportunity for individuals and influencers to express their opinions, concerns, affects and emotions,

offering different interpretations and frames of the news media to their own audiences and followers (Korpiola & Poutanen 2021). The contemporary media system operates as a “multi-purpose arena” in line with Gadi Wolfsfeld’s metaphor (Wolfsfeld 1997; 2011).

Many different actors facilitated the creation of Mask Gate across multiple platforms and media channels. Journalistic news media played an important role by providing fact-checked news and investigative journalism, including the pivotal original scoop concerning the suspicious mask deals that was published on 4th of April 2020 in *Suomen Kuvalehti*.

A significant role was also played by politicians, members of government and officials, as well as political influencers who expressed their views and participated in debates on social media, outside of the institutional news media. Politicians and officials were utilising the self-directed communication by using their chosen online channels in a form of mass self-communication to construct a meaning in the public mind (e.g. Castells 2009, 71).

The central actors of the events were the Prime Minister of Finland, CEOs of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare – a research institute operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency and the ministers and chiefs of Ministry of Social



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Affairs and Health. The Prime Minister and CEO of the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare were particularly active on social media by utilising Twitter as the personal mass communication medium while communicating directly to the public, different stakeholders and networks.

Different news media platforms, such as Helsingin Sanomat, which is the largest subscription newspaper in Finland and the Nordic countries; YLE, the Finnish Broadcasting Company, which is the national public service in Finland, and tabloid newspapers, such as Iltalehti and Iltasanomat, with their widely visited websites provided public arenas for discussions through their reader comment boards. Also, the blogosphere of the daily online news service Uusi Suomi was an important platform for public discussion.

The Finnish media is committed to follow the standards of the *Guidelines for Journalists* defined by the Finnish Council for Mass Media (JSN 2011), consequently,

their news comment boards are moderated in line with several parameters. In addition to these arenas provided by traditional news media outlets, Twitter functions as a central platform for political discussion in Finland (e.g. Ruoho & Kuusipalo, 2019). Therefore, its role was pivotal in this media event as it served as one of the central platforms for hosting the public debate. Different platforms in the hybrid media system provide a stage for participatory democracy and offer easy access for shaping public narratives.

Additionally, hashtags and algorithms feature as important elements in the construction of a media event in hybrid media system, as much of the social activity in the present media landscape is facilitated by them. In our analysis, we found that the hashtag #maskigate (“#maskigate”) was the 6th most popular of the Twitter hashtags in the whole mask conversation with 2845 mentions, which was more than #koronavirus (“#coronavirus”) and #Covid19 during the same time frame. In fact, within



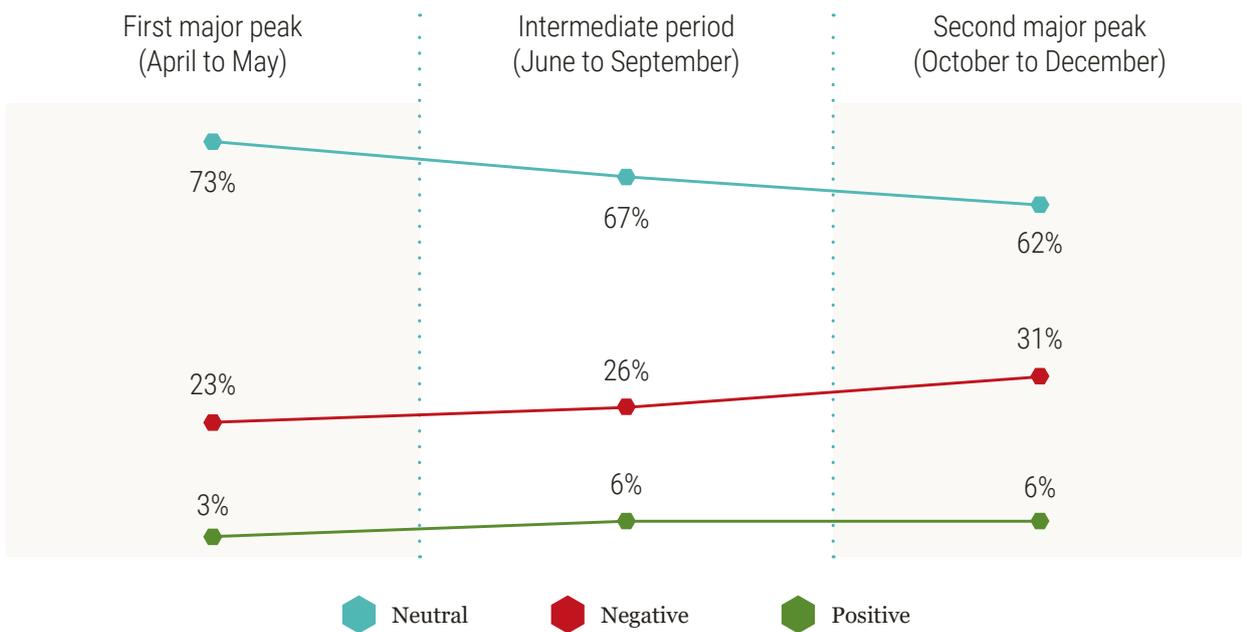


Figure 2. The proportion of sentiments in all messages over the three different time periods.

the mask gate data set, it was the most popular hashtag.

What role do affective reactions play in the construction of the media event?

Shared collective emotions have been a central idea in classical media events theory. The hybrid media system provides a space for spreading and expressing emotions – both negative and positive. Through positive or negative emotional content, the audiences are forming various social networks and socially constructed solidarities. Shared emotions in social media discussions draw attention, ‘validate’ the argument and dramatise the media event, whilst harnessing public attention (e.g. Korpiola & Poutanen 2021).

According to our data, proportions of negative emotions grew over the period of the media event. The neutral tone was the most prevalent during the first phase, when the failed deal was covered and reports on mask effectiveness were discussed widely. During the intermediate period, the amount of negative emotions increased, but also positive tone increased. However, during the second peak there was clearly an increase in negative tone (Figure 2).

We argue that the failed mask acquisition started as a media scandal, which Cottle (2006,60) defines as one sub-class of an expectational media phenomena that typically depend on revelations and claims that are followed up by further disclosures and/or counterclaims, and which often escalate, occasionally leading to some



form of morally approved sanctions. For instance, in this case it was the CEO of the Finnish National Emergency Supply Agency who was forced to resign due to failed mask acquisitions.

The scandal was not over after the initial phase, but the public concern remained and continued in different phases and was frequently debated, referencing the hashtag #MaskiGate on social media. It continued for nearly six months on social media, often with heated attitudes. In the context of social

media, the social has been said to function by the logic of sensation. Laaksonen and Pöyry (2018) found that viral sensational events are a regular part of social media content. Viral events last longer when more and more people get exposed to them and the event spreads from one platform to several others (Laaksonen & Pöyry 2018). The Mask Gate was not confined to social media, but was simultaneously fueled by traditional news media coverage. Therefore, the Mask Gate was not only a social media flare-up but rather a real media event.



Discussion and conclusion

This study demonstrated that the current information environment, which is characterised by the hybrid media system, can be very volatile. Multiple storylines pop up constantly, rendering the environment truly chaotic and saturated with emotions. In this context, firm narratives provide a means for organising the attention of news production and discussion on social media. Mask Gate can be seen as a *continuous media event*, which had points of discontinuation, but nevertheless lasted intensively over the period of six months and remains on the agenda at the time of writing at the end of 2021. Social media has plays a major role in sustaining this dynamic, since it serves as an engine for keeping the story alive and regularly reminding spectators of the scandal. Thus, the case is not closed, and new episodes are bound to follow, whenever new and valid information emerges. The audience remains in constant anticipation of the next plot twist. Consequently, we may speculate that such event could be kept alive by consistently reminding or mobilising the audience by keeping the storyline active through suggestions, hints or leaks regarding potential future developments. Arousal of attention is easy to mobilise through the already existing hashtag #maskigate. When the audience shows interest in the story, the mainstream media also have motivation to dig deeper and strive for new revelations or

plot twists. On social media, the hashtag #maskigate still resonates to this day, with application in various contexts. The hashtag bears the emotions attached to the original news coverage topped with the affective responses of social media users, which are for their part boosted by social media algorithms.

Prolonged media attention, which we call here a *continuous media event* with multiple episodes and dedicated hashtags could pose a major societal risk through impacting people's sense of psychological security, particularly amidst a state of emergency. The digitalised environment poses a real challenge to crisis leadership and crisis communications with new risks following (Korpiola & Poutanen 2021). Disputes about the usefulness of masks and officials' responsibilities are a necessary part of the democratic public discourse. At the same time, there is an added risk that such disputes can harm and undermine the collective sense of safety during crisis, exacerbating the strategic communications challenge for politicians, who need to both oversee the work of public organizations as well as partake in managing and moderating the collective emotions of the public. There is a risk that public disputes stoke the sense of insecurity and foment potential polarisation. From a pragmatic point of view, it is necessary to ask how to balance



between these roles in leadership and crisis communication.

The study of media events appears to retain relevance 30 years since the theoretical work founded by Dayan and Katz. The relevance of media events in the digital era, as part of the current hybrid media system, is more salient than ever, since the system provides many access points for human and non-human actors to influence the public discourse. Moreover, media events in the current hybrid media system can be simultaneously disruptive and unifying, generating solidarities among different communities and networks. The *information environment* has changed, and therefore, the media events are constructed in a different manner combining the forces of traditional and social media, as well as active audiences and interest groups.

Tamar Liebes, a renowned scholar of media events, noted back in 1998 that people turn to media when they have lost their sense of personal safety for their families and when they feel that the crisis remains unresolved. In the present information environment, people are exposed through the hybrid media system to volumes of media content that provide multiple truths, frames and interpretations. News media and communication provided by government and officials therefore bears a critical role in times of crisis and particularly during states of emergency. Therefore, a further study of media events should be conducted with a question: how and

through what kind of communications in the current information environment can a sense of psychological security be attained in times of societal crisis? In sum, we must pay attention to the vulnerabilities and threats posed by the hybrid media system during a societal crisis. In the words of Tamar Liebes: the crucial question which concerns [television] journalism as well as participatory democracies is how to define the line between inviting participation and inciting collective hysteria in moments of crisis (Liebes 1998,83).



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