

# FROM “UNBELIEVABLE STUPIDITY” TO “SECRET CLUES FOR STAYING HEALTHY”: CAM LANDSCAPE AND BOUNDARY-WORK IN ESTONIAN AND FINNISH MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN APRIL 2020

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**Abstract:** Based on a one-month (April 2020) comparative observation of media content in three Estonian and three Finnish mainstream media sources (two daily newspapers and one weekly women’s magazine) along with some examples from an earlier period, the authors analysed the representation of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the media. The analysis showed that the media from the two countries presented CAM both in its various mainstream and more fringe forms, and that pejorative as well as complimentary and attracting undertones were present. The authors conclude that CAM topics were present in the selection of sources as methods for wellbeing and healing but also as entertaining, exoticising, warning, and mystical-metaphorical allusions along with different levels of boundary-work, especially science. The authors also noted interesting differences between the chosen media both within one country and between the two countries in terms of how much CAM was present as well as in which ways it was treated. In the Estonian material, the scale of tones was broader: the texts presented highly sensational, exoticising and othering angles towards approaches that were considered extreme and dangerous but mainly entertainment-oriented, and they positively described healing and wellbeing practices, sometimes with a mystic touch. The Finnish media was more low-key in its representations and tone: the mentions were shorter and less frequent. Although the Finnish material had more positive representations, this does not suggest that CAM is more tolerated in Finland – the Finnish media presented less extreme forms of CAM, which gave less ground for journalistic opposition.

**Keywords:** alternative medicine, boundary-work, media representations

## INTRODUCTION

In the recent decade, interest in alternative medicine has been consistently high or has even increased in Estonia. Representative statistics show that a significant number of people are ready to use or already use alternative medical approaches (e.g. in a 2015 Estonian poll, 62 percent of respondents agreed that some sensitive persons can heal illnesses; see Saar Poll 2015). At the same time, in 2019, the National Health Board of Estonia organised a public media campaign for raising awareness of the health risks associated with ‘fake medicine’ (meaning non-evidence-based alternative approaches) (Terviseamet 2019). In Finland, the use of CAM seems to have slightly declined between 2008 and 2018. One possible explanation for this is that the medical establishment has publicly expressed very open criticism; another reason may be that today’s particularly popular practices (such as yoga, mindfulness, various mind-and-body treatments and energy healing) were not included in the survey designed in the year 2008 (only prayer represents spiritual healing methods), and it is thus possible that the use of CAM is more widespread in reality. While it is difficult to compare the popularity of CAM internationally (due to the lack of compatible statistics), the use of CAM in Finland is estimated to be at the level of the Scandinavian average, which shows that around 30 percent of the population reports the use of CAM for personal health and wellbeing. Research clearly emphasises the importance of CAM to those who engage in it (Vuolanto et al. 2020).

In 2018, the general estimation (using 2014 European Social Survey data) was that 25.9 percent of the European population uses some form of complementary and alternative medicine – with considerable differences between countries (Kemppainen et al. 2018; some estimates are even higher, e.g. Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 3). This trend goes hand in hand with the general therapeutic turn of recent decades and the permeation of therapeutic discourse in the cultures of the Western world (cf. Illouz 2008; Madsen & Ytre-Arne 2012: 20; Salmenniemi et al. 2020). Interesting socio-democratic differences are associated with CAM in Europe, indicating that use is more common among women and individuals with higher education who often combine biomedical and CAM therapies (Kemppainen et al. 2018; Uibu & Vihalemm 2017: 356).

Although numerous authors have drawn a parallel between the increasing popularity of CAM and reasons such as individuals’ dissatisfaction with the state medical system (long queues, limited visit time, invasiveness of methods, etc.), other research has shown that often people are not necessarily unhappy with the state medical system or biomedicine use CAM; they rather hope to benefit more from combining the two instead of using one separately (cf. Ruggie 2004: 49–50; Lüddeckens & Schrimpf 2018; Kemppainen et al. 2018). One of

the key factors of the popularity of CAM seems to be the availability of respective information (mainstream as well as alternative media, courses, services of practitioners), which enables recipients to complement their existing medical knowledge without an explicit conversion from one medical system to the other. However, patients are not eager to discuss their interest in CAM with conventional doctors during their visits, fearing that they would be condemned or simply not understood (cf. Hiimäe 2017: 26; Passalacqua et al. 2004: 1081; Penson et al. 2001: 463; Kemppainen et al. 2018: 449). Thus, a significant amount of the information on CAM is elicited from other sources.

There are a number of research articles that stress the role of mass media in spreading information about CAM and influencing decisions for its use; for example, according to one study, “many consumers use popular media, especially women’s magazines, to learn about CAM” (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671; see also Utriainen 2013) and, according to another, “many cancer patients within developed nations cite the media as informing their decision to use complementary and alternative medicine” (Mercurio & Elliott 2011: 67). However, it is often not clear from such research which exact details media users learn about CAM from the media and through which practical output such information finds them (e.g. decisions to use or avoid certain CAM; the media can also reflect and construct curiosity towards CAM-related topics that is not directly connected to its use). Respective research articles do not usually cite the direct feedback of media recipients, but conclusions are drawn on the basis of a set of investigated media articles. For example, one article concludes that as most media articles about CAM are “quite simplistic” (i.e., present only limited facts in an often prejudiced journalistic frame), they are not very informative or useful information channels for media users (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673), and another presumes: “It appears that much of the information the public receives about CAM is inaccurate or incomplete” (Bonevski & Wilson & Henry 2008: e2406; a similar study: Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010). At the same time, a problem is that in earlier studies the role of electronic media (e.g., online commentaries and forums) is underrepresented, and the focus is mainly on the printed media. In our study, we also considered, to some extent, online comments on our sample media articles.

Our material proved – as some of the above-cited works also indicated – that the information about CAM in the media is often presented in stereotypical ways, in many cases using strong opposites and contrasts of science versus non-science, dangerous versus safe, experts versus deniers, etc. For example, we found (especially in the Estonian material) modes of description that claimed in a critic-free and absolutizing manner the effectiveness or dangerousness of CAM. We suggest that despite the tone of an article, it can still raise interest in

media users and trigger them to seek additional information. Several observed articles on CAM were followed by online comments such as: “Journalists make such a heavy advertisement that I’m already getting interested in this stuff” (this particular comment followed an Estonian newspaper article on the dangerousness of Miracle Mineral Supplement (MMS)). Even if such comments are sometimes written ironically, the idea that a media article elicited interest in dangerously depicted CAM occurred in comments remarkably often.

## **THE AIM OF THE ARTICLE**

The aim of the article is to analyse comparatively the portrayal/representation of CAM topics in three mainstream print media in Estonia and Finland in April 2020. We discuss some aspects, such as the general tone and choice of the agents who mediate the information; epithets, connotative meanings, evaluative adjectives, overtly or covertly negative representations through ridiculing, othering, exoticising and contrasting axis lines (e.g. safe – dangerous; we – the cultural/ideological other) to express support to certain dominating ideologies and attitudes towards alternative approaches. One of the aims is to show how CAM is represented by and through boundary-work between science and religion. We follow Vuolanto’s (2013: 14–17, drawing on Gieryn 1995) understanding of boundary-work as the power-laden rhetorical differentiation between diverse cultural fields or territories such as science, non-science, and religion. Boundary-work is an analytical perspective most fruitfully applied to cases of debate and controversy or to the interfaces between cultural domains, and we are interested in the ways in which boundary-work against influential cultural systems such as religion and science takes place in relation to CAM in our selection of media material.

Estonia and Finland are neighbouring countries with similarities and differences in their religious profile. Both have an increasingly pluralistic and religious landscape, but the role of the Lutheran Church is less substantial in Estonia. Even if the dominance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) is diminishing in Finland, it is still a relatively strong cultural model (over 68 percent of the population still belong to ELCF in 2020), and the public presence of new spiritualities and neopagan forms of religion is more moderate than in Estonia. However, religious diversity and privatisation of religion is a steadily growing trend which is also reflected in mainstream Finnish media (Taira 2019). We hypothesised that the level of representation of various forms of and approaches to alternative medicine (debates and boundary-work about

the truth, depiction of miracle healers) is visible in the media and there are some repeated common models.

As for science and biomedicine, according to a Eurobarometer study, 91 percent of Estonians consider the impact of science and technology on the society positive, and 56 percent are interested in developments in these fields, whereby 58 percent think that, in the next 15 years, scientific innovation in medicine should be a priority (Raudvere 2016: 4–5, 8). The Finnish Science Barometer (2019) indicates that Finns have high respect for science and especially medicine: 74 percent of the sample reports interest in science and scientific research and 68 percent in the advances of medical knowledge. Although all segments of the Finnish population show interest in medical knowledge, women are clearly more interested than men. The mass media, and increasingly the Internet, is presently the most influential source of this knowledge. The socio-cultural value of religion and science, in important ways, frames the interest in CAM in our two countries.

## **ADDED VALUE TO PREVIOUS TOPICAL RESEARCH**

Most of the previous topical studies were conducted by researchers with a background in medicine or communication/media research, often relying solely on quantitative methods (e.g., Weeks & Strudsholm 2008; Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010). Having our background in folkloristics and the study of religion, we approach representations of CAM in the media in relation to people's beliefs and narratives and the behavioural models derived from these in their situative, varying, and fluctuating modes of use (see, e.g., Hiiemäe 2021; Utriainen 2020). For example, it seems insufficient to declare that "allegiance to the entertainment factor in health benefit or risk information may actually be dangerous" (Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010: 69), without knowing the actual reception models of various groups of media users. We support an approach which postulates that various discourses within media representations of CAM appeal to various specific audiences through resonance with their specific and often situational concerns and familiar discourses (cf. Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 1). For example, the same person may in some cases consume CAM-related media content because they are trying to find a cure for a health problem or, in other cases, get entertained by the dramatic contrasts or effectful shows presented (although the boundaries between these categories are again blurred).

Existing research focusing on certain groups of media users concentrates mainly on patients with a certain diagnosis (e.g., Mercurio & Elliott 2011; Passalacqua et al. 2004); however, a significant target group, which may be

testing media information on CAM mainly for preventive purposes, are healthy subjects whose interest in CAM may build just part of a lifestyle or be triggered by spiritual or psychological concerns that do not qualify as medical diagnoses. We suggest that a significant amount of CAM-related media content is rather directed towards the general population, including healthy subjects, even more so in the time of a general health crisis such as COVID-19, which potentially impacts everyone. Our analysis also indicates that CAM is a topic that has a place in several sections and story-types in mainstream media.

Finally, topical comparisons of various countries are quite rare, thus a comparison of the media situation in Estonia and Finland is an interesting and worthwhile addition to the research field – even more so because the majority of earlier studies are based on English-language media. We worked with Estonian- and Finnish-language media.

## MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is based on a one-month (April 2020) comparative observation of media content in three Estonian and three Finnish mainstream media sources (two daily newspapers and one weekly women's magazine) along with some salient examples from an earlier period. The viewed Estonian media consisted of the largest daily Estonian newspapers *Õhtuleht* and *Postimees*, and a weekly women's magazine *Naisteleht*. The Finnish media studied were daily newspapers *Helsingin Sanomat* (the largest national newspaper) and *Iltalehti*, and a weekly women's magazine *Anna*. We included a popular women-oriented magazine from both countries to see if representations in a media source focusing directly on women are different from others, since several researchers have concluded that CAM practices attract more female than male users (e.g. Kemppainen et al. 2018: 451, 453; Sointu 2011; Sointu & Woodhead 2008). As proof of such a demand, *Naisteleht* was preparing to publish a special issue, *Mystics*, offering interviews with healers and shamans in May 2020, which was advertised in April. As to Estonian media, digital versions were used for the newspapers, and the print version for the weekly magazine. As for Finland, digital versions of the media equal to print versions were used. In the following we cite our media material following the model PM5-11/4, where PM stands for the abbreviation of the media source, 5 for the number of the particular article that was given on a rolling basis, and 11/4 for the date when the article was published.

When the sample month was agreed as April 2020, we did not yet know that it would be the time of the COVID-19 virus spreading aggressively and also

affecting the media treatment of health issues. The timing of the collection of the research material had a relatively strong effect on what our material looks like. The material is thus coloured by and portrays the ways in which the three chosen print media give space and value to CAM in this very special time in these two Northern European countries.

Our approach was qualitative content analysis, which first identified the CAM-related content and the section of the newspaper/magazine in which it appeared, and then detected the tonality of articles, recurrent metaphors and motifs (e.g. symbols of war or fight against misinformation, self-development, lifestyle, myth-busting), the gender of people depicted in relation to CAM as well as agency and voice (who speaks in the name of whom, is the voice given to the practitioner/service-provider of a type of CAM, a doctor or professor of conventional medicine or a journalist). We also paid attention to the journalists' sources – whether they referred to a scientific article, another source or nothing. A descriptive grouping of statements enabled a thematic analysis. Our method draws on that of Teemu Taira, who studied the representations of and references to religion in Finnish newspapers over one week (Taira 2014; see also 2019).

As criteria for what to consider as material, we used a broad understanding of CAM: any topic related to medicine other than conventional medicine, anything mentioning complementary, alternative, spiritual, religious, natural healing, therapy or wellbeing. Thus, we use the term CAM in our article to describe heterogenous approaches of diagnostics, prophylactics, and treatments that are not scientifically approved (or in some cases even contradict the existing scientific understanding) – such as spiritual or energy healing, magic healing objects (e.g. semi-precious stones), breathing and meditation therapies. In our study, we also include the theme of anti-vaccination and deem the preventive and healing systems of traditional folk medicine (e.g. Ayurveda, Chinese and Tibetan traditional medicine, local traditional Estonian and Finnish folk medicine) as belonging to CAM. We define our theoretical understanding of CAM in the following chapter.

## **DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES OF CAM IN RESEARCH AND MEDIA**

Definitions of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in research literature are numerous; the majority of them stress that CAM is not presently considered part of conventional/mainstream medicine (cf. Micozzi 2006 [1996]; Bauer 2007; Ernst et al. 2008: 2). There have been attempts to categorise various types of CAM by characteristic techniques (energy medicine,

mind-body medicine, herbal medicine, lifestyle-based preventive medicine, etc. (see, e.g., Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671; Kemppainen et al. 2018: 450), but the borders between these categories are blurry. Pekka Louhiala (2010: 115) has even concluded that because of the multifacetedness of therapies and blurred boundaries, “there seems to be no such thing as ‘alternative medicine’ in any meaningful sense”. Some researchers still, in turn, try to differentiate between complementary and alternative medicine (the former being viewed as closer to conventional medicine); for example, Estonian medical professor Arvo Tikk finds that “some alternative medicines like manual therapy, acupuncture, osteopathy, aroma-, light- and music therapy are somewhat justified and accepted as part of medical interventions and, in the case of their targeted use, they are somewhat helpful and do not harm a person. These are called complementary medicine” (Tikk 2005: 294).

Hence, from the official healthcare perspective, the term ‘complementary’ may refer to a method that can be used alongside conventional medicine, whereas ‘alternative’ is understood as treatment used in place of conventional medicine. The category ‘alternative medicine’ is thus often used more critically by the representatives of the medical establishment because it can (at least seemingly) build on premises that contradict standard empirical and evidence-based approaches (see Gale 2014; Green 2018). In the actual individual use of various health approaches, the picture is seldom as black and white because “therapeutic practices and discourses can be productively conceptualised as diverse, situated, and context-specific ‘assemblages’ that may be politicising or depoliticising, individualising or collectively oriented, commonly welcomed or shunned by the public imaginary – and, of course, many of these things simultaneously” (Salmenniemi et al. 2020: 2).

The fact that there is not one single indubious understanding of CAM among doctors, cultural and social researchers, alternative practitioners or CAM users (cf. a similar conclusion by Tovey & Easthope & Adams 2003: 2) is understandable because the subject’s borders are changing in time with new regulations, trends, and visibilities, mirroring important social and cultural power relations (Gale 2014; Lüddeckens & Schrimpf 2018: 14; Vuolanto et al. 2020). Thus, boundaries of medicine and science are not determined by their intrinsic nature, but rather by the ways in which society, in a given period, defines them – a negotiation process going hand in hand with societal changes (see a similar thought by Jacob 2015: 357). Our material showed active boundary-work between science and other knowledge systems concerning the relationship of science with non-science, religion, magic, irrationality, New Age and other systems of knowledge considered unscientific (see also Vuolanto 2013: abstract;



246–269). Even in geographically, politically and, in some respects, religiously similar countries, societal and media attitudes can be somewhat different, as we noticed in our examples from Estonia and Finland.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTED MATERIAL**

### **Estonia**

There was almost an equal number of positive and negative CAM mentions (26/57 negative, 28/57 positive and 3/57 ambivalent). However, it was remarkable how the three Estonian media sources differed in the tone in which they depicted the topic.<sup>1</sup> Most of the articles related to CAM were full, long articles, only a few of them focused on other topics, containing some short references to CAM.

*Table 1. Tonality in the Estonian sample of 57 articles.*

Source	<i>Postimees</i> (mainstream newspaper)	<i>Õhtuleht</i> (tabloid)	<i>Naisteleht</i> (women’s weekly)
Negative	11	14	1
Positive	0	17	11
Neutral	1	2	0
Total	12	33	12

### ***Postimees (PM)***

All articles in the mainstream newspaper PM had a connection with COVID-19, often taking a moralistic tone regarding alternative forms of medicine that were repeatedly called “dangerous”. PM posted five full articles on CAM-related topics that depicted folk or alternative medicine in foreign countries – all in a clearly critical othering and exoticising tone. The titles of this article set include, for example: “Peculiar occurrences and unbelievable stupidity go hand in hand with corona crisis” (PM1-1/4). It is repeated three times in PM1-1/4 that the described activities used against coronavirus (e.g., drinking cow’s urine, showering disinfectant on people, using special shopping orders) are “peculiar”, once that they are “silly and peculiar”, and the opinion that “India seems to be an especially good soil for oddities” also makes an appearance. There is a clear

boundary between CAM and belief on the one hand, and science on the other hand, putting CAM and belief into a negative light, e.g. in sentences like “For many Hindus, belief is stronger than the voice of scientists” (PM1-1/4). Nameless experts are cited representing the voice of science.

A retrospective article about Ebola in Africa in 2014 (PM2-4/4) gives a polarised and absolutising description of Liberian society: “There was a clear divide between belief and science, many [Liberians] had no earlier contact with Western science-based medicine because they were cured by local wise men and women.” In another article about Africa (PM3-6/4), the author, who is given the title ‘expert of Africa’, mentions that “according to a wide-spread myth [in Africa], COVID-19 is a white man’s disease,” thus degrading a local hypothesis as ‘myth’ and leaving no space for the possibility that some local people may not share this belief. The article is illustrated with a photograph from a slum, thus connoting poverty and non-civilization in relation to people who believe in ‘myths’, and at the same time creating a one-sided othering picture as if all of Africa consists of slums. The author claims that because of the African belief that “Africans are immune to corona because they are God’s children, the virus can start spreading in Africa even faster than in Europe,” creating the polarised opinion as though there were no comparable beliefs in Europe. Othering claims referring to extreme stupidity occur again, e.g. in this sentence: “It is actually Zimbabwe from where the weirdest claims related to corona come, for example, when people gather in a church, they go directly to hell”, picking out the most absurd-sounding beliefs to represent the African reaction. Bringing an example of one extreme form of CAM as representative of the absurdity of all types of CAM has occurred in several articles.

One article (PM7-18/4) claims that during the corona crisis, the need for cat and dog meat has increased in Asia “because people believe in the healing abilities of dog and cat meat”. The sentence talks in an absolutising way about ‘people’, presenting the opinion that everybody in Asia shares this belief, and simultaneously creating a negative connection between local health behaviour and beliefs. The article offers another absolutising claim, saying that “health workers talk to patients routinely about the usefulness of cat and dog meat”, as if all health workers in Asia give such advice on a daily basis. In this context, the health workers are not representing science or scientific medicine, but there is still boundary-work with science – the article repeats twice that there is no scientific proof of the healing abilities of such meat. Again, acting as a contrasting counterpart to those who use CAM, nameless ‘experts’ give a warning in the article about “spreading dangerous diseases” by “keeping large numbers of animals in cages and killing them non-hygienically”, bringing additional connotations with non-purity and danger.

One article (PM4-8/4) describes a popular Ukrainian-born healer who is called a charlatan healer and an alleged miracle healer. PM4-8/4 gives a retrospective overview of his popular TV healing shows in the Soviet times and his new activity during the corona crisis. The disparaging tone makes allusions with madness and danger, for example: “Ukrainian-born healer, who turned people mad (allegedly also literally) 30 years ago, posted a new healing séance on his YouTube channel a week ago, which has now been watched 350,000 times”. Later, there are clear hints to charlatanism, greed, and the need for scepticism, e.g. conclusions that “some of his séances are comical”, he “obviously sees crises as a possibility to make money”, “we should be sceptical of his healing abilities”, and “it is clear that his words do not help against corona”.

Articles about local situations also often create polarised negative depictions of groups related to some types of CAM, exposing them to the backdrop of science or conventional medicine. For example, an article in the humour section makes jokes about the stereotypes related to the anti-vaccine movement (PM5-11/4). The humourist takes over the role of an anti-vaccination activist, talking in the first person. First, he hints at the simplified stereotypical understanding, according to which anti-vaxxers only get information via Internet search engines: “I have googled so much that I have become an expert in the medical field and I’m completely well oriented in the topic.” Secondly, he claims that according to anti-vaxxers, COVID-19 did not disappear because of vaccinations “but because of smearing with goose fat and using vodka socks, strengthened by a Christian worldview and traditional family values”, which is at the same time a hint at the beliefs and values allegedly held by Estonian conservative party EKRE. In conclusion, the humourist says that the fact that viruses pass without vaccines is as sure “as the fact that the Earth is flat”, making a rhetorical hint at a much disputed belief that has become a symbol of silliness and naivety in Estonia. Another article (PM11-27/4) written by an Estonian politician hints at the goose fat cure, putting it in the context of scarce school education and thus equating its use with simple-mindedness.

Several times, the articles clearly call some types of CAM that have become popular during the corona crisis ‘false’, ‘false beliefs’ or ‘fake news’, e.g. an article is titled “Fake news having a golden time” (PM9-25/4). On the other end of the scale are experts who correct these beliefs. For example, a woman named an ‘expert’ in an article title (PM10-27/4) – although the text later reveals that she is a junior researcher, which, in the research hierarchy, is not considered a very high-level expert – says that if someone were to inject disinfectant (which US President Donald Trump jokingly suggested), “it is highly probable that it would kill us”. In the next sentence she adds that “the same applies to spirits and various alcoholic drinks if someone would try to use them internally for

inactivating the virus”, and also to chloride (MMS) use. There seems to be a conscious attempt to signal that certain types of CAM can kill. In another article (PM8-21/4), the WHO warns that “alcohol does not protect against viruses and consuming it during epidemics may even decrease the ability of the immune system to fight viruses”. The only somewhat positive mention of alternative approaches in PM comes from a psychologist who suggests that when a person in a crisis feels that a method is helpful to them, it is acceptable to use even meditative practices or superstition to help decrease anxiety and fear (PM4-8/4).

It was characteristic of articles in PM that a voice was almost never given to the practitioners of CAM and, if at all, only in a short expression that was later reframed by the journalist. CAM was mostly opposed in favour of science or evidence-based medicine.

### ***Õhtuleht (ÕL)***

The tabloid ÕL used a wider spectrum of tones and characterisations of CAM. However, most articles can still be classified into three categories: entertainment, teachings of living (mainly given in a positive tone and bringing ‘softer’ examples of CAM that are accepted in the society), and moralistic warning (always served in a strongly pejorative or sarcastic tone, supported by negative epithets and rather extreme examples). Interestingly, even authors who were sarcastic towards CAM used figurative language referring to mystics and religion to describe the corona crisis situation. For example in ÕL2-1/4, an older journalist styling herself as ‘aunty’ said: “Aunty has the feeling that the gods have organised a roundtable discussion and decided that something should be done to hinder the unstoppable growth of the population and the even more unstoppable growth of environmental pollution”. In ÕL19-23/4, a well-known doctor (with the epithet ‘PhD of medical sciences’) writes, in metaphorical language, about the possibility that the tuberculosis vaccine helps protect against coronavirus: “But possibly, there is one more protective angel who protects us against this wicked COVID-19 virus.”

As in PM, five moralistic articles published in ÕL within this period contain rather extreme or ridiculous-sounding examples of alternative medical approaches from foreign cultures (e.g., using bear bile to cure corona in China – ÕL3-1/4; a goat owner covering the faces of his goats with self-made protective masks to protect them from COVID-19 in India – ÕL8-9/4). In these articles, the main voice comes from the journalist who uses pejorative framings, such as “The impact of corona in Tajikistan is weird” (ÕL15-14/4) or announces in the title of the article that using bear bile is ‘humbug’ (ÕL3-1/4).

In several cases, there is negative connection drawn between CAM and religion, e.g. a sentence in ÕL14-14/4 sees causal relationships between corona and religion: “Bnei Barak is one of the most religious cities in Israel; unfortunately, this means that corona is spreading incredibly quickly there”. The article describes in a moralistic tone how religion makes people passive and reluctant towards vaccinations, bringing the example of last year’s measles epidemic in the orthodox areas of the USA where “the number of vaccinated children was very low, circa 77 percent”.

Also in some other articles anti-vaccine ideals are equated with stupidity and danger; e.g. in ÕL12-11/4, an Estonian developer of vaccines says that the grassroots anti-vaccine campaign “is the biggest nonsense” and “if there were no vaccines, we would be attacked by serious epidemics which we have already forgotten but which are at least as dangerous, if not more dangerous than COVID-19”. ÕL2-1/4 describes “fighting anti-vaxxers” who think that “vaccines are from the devil” and who “do not remember the terrible consequences of the polio epidemic”. ÕL20-23/4 is about corona-deniers who promote “fake medicines like MMS”. Additionally, the article mentions that an anti-vax social media group got 3000 new members in just a few weeks, concluding that “during pandemics, besides the virus, fake news is a big problem”. ÕL20-23/4 cites ‘scientists and other experts’ who stress that such denier theories are not only absurd, but also dangerous. In ÕL1-1/4, there is talk about the “shopping boom of the COVID-19 ‘miracle medicine’”, connoting that using a medicine whose effectiveness is not yet scientifically proven is irrational and dangerous.

The newspaper criticizes several times US President Donald Trump’s sarcastic suggestion to use disinfectant internally (ÕL21-25/4, ÕL25-28/4) and one of his supporters promoting the use of bleach as a miraculous cure. ÕL21-25/4 additionally mentions the death of 300 people in Iran who died of methanol poisoning, and concludes that such cases show how dangerous the dissemination of such ‘misinformation’ can be.

In articles with a positive tone (e.g. describing exercises for reducing stress, increasing energy flow and creating mental balance), scientific language is often combined with a mystic vocabulary, and the border between curing illnesses and simply safeguarding wellbeing and pampering oneself is blurry. As visuality has become important in the written media, ÕL repeatedly reflected on a series of video shows titled ‘Minutes of zing/energy shot’, in which a man dubbed ‘health guru’ and ‘health devotee’ taught practices, such as Tibetan yoga (ÕL17-14/4), a “sexy stretch that helps let female and male energies flow” (ÕL22-28/4), and “fire breathing that makes our organs function well” (ÕL29-30/4) in an entertaining way. A couple of separate articles with a positive tone

are more information-oriented but still non-critically absolutising, praising yoga lectures for men (ÖL23-28/4) and “peaceful body-mind training” combining Tibetan sun-greetings and stretching “that suits all” (ÖL26-28/4). There were also some personal experience stories from healers, healing plant specialists and their family members, who described various health philosophies and practices (e.g., a well-known healing plant specialist teaches how to ‘sense’ which healing plant is right for you (ÖL24-28/4); a former journalist describes how she healed herself and later changed her profession to a kundalini yoga teacher (ÖL18-16/4); “a guru of conscious breathing” teaches how to overcome mental traumas with breathing techniques (ÖL11-10/4); the “best-known witch in Estonia” describes the most common problems that her patients have and also the risk for healers from working too much (ÖL6-3/4)).

In conclusion, similar to PM, critical articles in ÖL polarised science and evidence-based medicine against religion and CAM / traditional ways of healing, as seen in a boundary-creating comment by a journalist who printed an earlier interview with a ‘miracle healer’ and ‘hypno-energo therapist-surgeon’: “For April Fool’s Day and because of the corona crisis, we remember miracle healers from earlier times. Attention! This is an entertaining article; in the case of health problems, please go to qualified doctors” (ÖL4-1/4). In articles with a positive tone, CAM connoted health and inner balance; yet in articles with a negative tone, CAM connoted danger, fanatic belief, and stupidity. In all articles with a positive tone, a voice was given to CAM practitioners; however, in articles with a negative tone, a voice was given to the journalist or someone called ‘expert’.

### ***Weekly magazine Naisteleht (NL)***

The articles related to CAM in NL can be classified mainly into the category ‘teachings of living’. The journalistic framing of CAM (mostly rather ‘soft’ types that are accepted in the wider society as lifestyles, e.g. mind-body exercises, meditation, astrology) is positive, even the chief editor of the magazine sometimes uses somewhat mystical language, e.g. “the virus came to teach us something” (NL1-1/4). According to one article, we should perceive even the tiny details of everyday life “as a miracle and a blessing” (NL7-8/4). NL contains almost no contrasting rhetoric that would oppose CAM and conventional medicine or science; religion is also described in a rather positive tone. There are longer interviews with an astrologist titled ‘the first lady of astrology in Estonia’ (NL3-1/4), a pastor (NL2-1/4), and an ex-criminal (NL11-22/4), who talk about their life philosophies that contain opinions about coronavirus but also tips for finding

and maintaining inner balance. For example, the ex-criminal describes how he wrote letters of forgiveness to all people in order to achieve peace of mind.

Five of the articles are from the weekly series of *Avesta* – a calendar written by an Estonian numerologist, allegedly based on ancient Zoroastrian teachings. *Avesta* also contains health tips related to the moon – e.g., which organs can be strengthened, or which medical treatment gives better results during a waxing moon. Every week, it also gives a list of body parts and organs that are more vulnerable on specific days and thus need special protection.

The activities for keeping good health are sometimes described as a luxury, e.g., according to the description, a made-in-Estonia relaxing app helps preserve mental health and offers a “spa-experience for the senses” (NL6-2/4). There is only one article with a somewhat negative tone that analyses vernacular health tips during the corona crisis, revealing them as ‘myths’ that do not work, but the connotation of danger is not present here.

## **Finland**

In the Finnish material, we found mentions of CAM in 51 articles during our sample month. The three Finnish media sources showed some differences in the tone in which they depicted the topic, so that in both *Anna* (women’s weekly) and *Iltalehti* (tabloid), most of the mentions were presented in a positive tone (9/12 in *Anna* and 11/15 in *IL*). The mainstream newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* differed in that it gave somewhat less positive representations (14/24), meaning that around one-third of its depictions were either critical or ambivalent. All in all, neutral/ambivalent mentions were rare: only two in *HS*, none in *IL*, and one in *Anna*.

**Table 2.** *Tonality in the Finnish sample of 51 articles.*

Source	<i>Helsingin Sanomat</i> (mainstream newspaper)	<i>Iltalehti</i> (tabloid)	<i>Anna</i> (women’s weekly)
Negative	8	4	2
Positive	14	11	9
Neutral	2	0	1
Total	24	15	12

We will provide an analysis of the contents, context, and tone of the CAM presentations as well as the voice and boundary-work used in the construction of the representations. There are similarities with the Estonian material; however, our Finnish findings seem slightly less colourful and extreme in comparison. We give our observations starting from the biggest daily newspaper and first present the more positive and after that the more critical tones and framings, paying attention to boundary-work along the way.

### ***Helsingin Sanomat (HS)***

The mainstream newspaper HS had very few articles in which a CAM-related topic was the main one,<sup>2</sup> and most of them were feature stories. More often, CAM was present in the text as a shorter mention. We also observed different rhetoric uses of CAM in the material. In the very first observation of the sample month, there was a feature article on a male mentalist (HS1-2/4). Since mentalism is a lesser-known skill or profession to many Finns, mentalist was differentiated from a spiritual medium in the text. There was thus negative, or critical, boundary-work towards a form of traditional or vernacular CAM practice. To counterbalance this, mindfulness was mentioned in a very positive tone as an important mental and wellbeing practice for the interviewee.

There were also other feature stories in the HS material portraying well-known people such as actors, musicians, and athletes, both men and women, who talked, more or less in passing, about their mindfulness and yoga practices or, much more rarely, their religiosity or spirituality (HS2-4/4, HS7-14/4, HS9-15/4). There were several mentions of yoga, meditation, and especially mindfulness, and they were all given in a positive tone (HS1-2/4, HS12-18/4, HS17-24/4, HS19-25/4, HS21-27/4, HS23-30/4, HS24-30/4). This positive portrayal was generally framed as a secular personal wellbeing device. In many of these articles, mindfulness especially was described in psychological terms as a useful, scientifically based and validated means of reducing stress and enhancing emotional skills – both being deemed as important wellbeing tools in a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic. In one article mindfulness was also recommended for small children (HS12-18/4). Meditation received positive mentions in articles whose topic was the sauna (HS23-30/4) and audio books (HS19-25/4) – meditation audio books were recommended to be listened to at a slower speed than some other literary genres, thus emphasising their special content or use. There was also one long interview with well-known historian and non-fiction writer Yuval Noah Harari, who was said to practice Vipassana meditation on a daily basis (HS5-11/4). The article also recounted



Harari having commented on the present COVID-19 crisis by saying that it will make even religious leaders rely more on science.

Some feature stories in HS described less publicly legitimised, scientifically anchored, and secularised CAM methods, and sometimes made use of them in rhetorical ways. In a feature article on a popular female TV host and her sister, the interviewee jokingly says that she has tried to ‘inflict’ alternative (she uses the word ‘humbug’) thinking on her sister (without success) and that she has given energy-healing to her own husband (HS2-4/4). Another full-length feature story (entitled “The alchemist of male souls”) on a male wellbeing coach makes rhetorical use of an “ancient Finnish witchcraft ritual” in its depiction of the special outlook of the topic and the featured male (HS11-weekly supplement 23/4). There was one more critical mention of yoga in a column in which the columnist writes about India and gives space to well-known writer Arundhati Roy’s widely circulated text which sharply contrasts the yoga videos shared by the Indian prime minister with the abuse of homeless migrant workers during the COVID-19 regulations (HS10-16/4), thus indicating that the head of the state puts more emphasis on middle-class wellbeing than the suffering of lower-class citizens.

With a clearly critical tone and framing, there was a long column on the use of crystals and semi-precious stones which are popular in some new spiritual practices (HS3-5/4). The long title of the column summarises its content: “Stones bigger than life: The popularity of new spirituality grows, and so does the market of crystals. These beautiful stones have their darker side.” The criticism in this article is not only targeted towards spirituality as a worldview and commercial phenomenon, but also its connection to the exploitation of third-world mineral resources and workforce. Therefore, we might say that the article applied a post-colonial frame.

As the media often circulates and comments on other media, HS commented on a column published in the national broadcasting company by a well-known academic, essayist, and self-identified atheist who often openly critiques religion and spirituality and non-scientific worldviews. His column entitled “Truth returns to the time of post-truth” emphasised the “return of rationality” and declared how “even alternative folk returns from silver water to hand disinfectant” (HS8-15/4) in the pandemic. His voice and position as a public intellectual and thought leader, making very visible boundary-work, is noteworthy in this context.

The overall content of the HS material during the sample month was very strongly pro-science. This became clear both in the ways in which mindfulness and yoga were framed and justified by science and in the great volume of articles and news related to the medical framing of COVID-19. We did not collect all of

the material in our sample, but in some of the articles CAM-related topics were taken up in a critical tone and contrasted with science. One such article, on the development of a vaccine and medicine against coronavirus, draws a sharp contrast between two blocks in the contemporary world, one being those (good modern) countries in which “the only common god is handwash” and the other (less developed) countries in which the “healthcare system and larger society function very much on prayers alone” (HS6-12/4). Hence, polarisation between science and medicine on the one hand and religion and traditional ways of healing on the other hand was present, even if our HS material did not give much independent space to the latter.

### ***Iltalehti (IL)***

Like HS, the Finnish tabloid (IL) also featured some stories, often in the lifestyle section, on individuals and their practice of yoga, meditation, mindfulness or spirituality (IL2-4/4, IL5-14/4, IL8-18/4, IL10-21/4, IL11-23/4). Some of these articles, categorisable as art of living, were about new work-life phenomena or the change of profession of individual interviewees; one such article was titled “From hobby to work” (IL2-4/4). These articles gave a voice to the interviewees, both male and female, and depicted mostly positive aspects of their (new) way of life. There were also tips on how to practice yoga by video connection and how to use mindfulness for learning not to touch your face in order to prevent infection (IL9-18/4, IL12-26/4). One article mentioned the popular KonMari method for organising life by getting rid of unnecessary material possessions (IL8-18/4). More general articles wrote about how different kinds of stress-reduction techniques, such as breathing techniques or emotion-work methods, can be learned and integrated into one’s daily life, and also how they may become useful in the time of the epidemic and isolation (IL1-3/4, IL14-28/4). In the IL material, there were a couple of mentions of the potential positive effects of vitamin D and organic medicine (IL4-14/4, IL6-16/4). We found one long feature article that gave space to the topic of sex as a form of healing (IL3-11/4). There was one short positive mention of clairvoyance (IL5-14/4) as well as one mention of premonition dreams (IL11-23/4), both in the context of interviews with well-known female individuals.

IL circulated and made use of a comment made by the Finnish prime minister who had said that, in the present COVID-19 situation, Finland does not need a crystal ball, but rather a useful road map (IL7-17/4). The columnist comments that this is a positive approach since “a crystal ball is a humbug method of a clairvoyant and we do not need that”. Here we can see very clear

boundary-work between humbug methods and what is considered sound politics. The most critical tone towards CAM-related topics in IL is seen when the journal recounts and reflects on US President Donald Trump's suggestion to use disinfectant (MMS) internally, and on some of his supporters who promote the use of bleach as a miraculous cure (IL13-11/4).

### ***Weekly magazine Anna (A)***

In the women's weekly *Anna*, the topics were mostly similar to those found in the newspapers and, as in Estonia, were mostly portrayed in a positive tone. Mindfulness, meditation, yoga as well as other breathing or mind-body practices were portrayed and framed in very positive ways and often presented in connection with wellbeing methods such as sport. In *Anna*, however, there was more variety present than in the newspapers and even versions of CAM, such as dream maps, numerology, sauna therapy, laugh therapy, and astrology were mentioned – representations were given in both positive and more critical tones (A1-2/4, A2-2/4, A3-8/4, A5-8/4, A9-22/4).

As women's magazines give relatively much space to feature stories, we found several articles that involved CAM in the lives of the individuals portrayed (mostly women). One unemployed actress recounted how she had studied as a sauna therapist and built a therapy room in her home, and how she wanted to continue to study to become a laugh therapist, too (A5-8/4). A female ex-model and chef mentioned her interest in yoga, but also how she has seldom time for it (A10-29/4) – as if yoga was something that needed to be mentioned positively in such an article and context. In a special section for recounting ordinary women's life stories, there was a one-page biography of a woman who had first studied as an engineer but later became interested in complementary and alternative medicine and, since she liked the exactitude of numbers, educated herself in numerology (A9-22/4).

The tone, however, is not always positive in the articles in the Finnish women's weekly. There were two articles that took a reserved or critical stance towards CAM. One of them mentioned methods such as dream maps, palm-reading, and astrology, saying that it is psychologically understandable that people turn to them in critical times of life and that these methods may be therapeutic but that they are often non-realistic (A3-8/4). In another article, a well-known female psychologist cautions against the 'over-positivity' that she finds has become a new 'mantra' and reminds the reader of the important lesson that life is not entirely in one's own hands (A7-22/4). There is also a long article entitled "Too good to be true", which writes explicitly about the dangers

of complementary and alternative medicine in its different forms and manifestations, such as health business, those who decline vaccinations, black salve, silver water, cancer-inducing bras and fake media (A11-29/4). As if to counter-balance this clearly critical article, the same issue in *Anna* includes a column by a known female entrepreneur and ex-politician, who writes in favour of self-help literature and mentions, for example, her important contemporary Buddhist teachers (A12-29/4).

In summary, it can be said that this Finnish women's weekly seems to balance the pros and cons of CAM as part of contemporary culture and women's everyday lives. *Anna* also gives more voice to the practitioners of CAM than IL and HS. Together with the other two Finnish media sources, *Anna* respects the authority of science but also understands non-scientific worldviews better than HS and IL, thus confirming research findings about women's interest in medicine, CAM, and spirituality.

## **REPRESENTATION MODELS: POLARISATIONS AND CONTRASTS**

Representations are a way of attaching meaning to something that, in a broader sense, cocreate cultural attitudes and even culture as such (cf. Hall 1997: 3). However, media representations are often based on a limited number of contrasts and story lines that have similarities with folk narratives. As Clive Seale (2003: 518) points out, the media – similarly to folk narratives – often works by creating and then exploiting oppositions that are based on classical, even archetypal, opposites like heroes and villains, pleasure and pain, safety and danger, clean and dirty, orthodox and alternative. Studies from various countries have pointed to the opposing sensationalism or tabloidisation that occurs in media reports about CAM (cf. Bonevski & Wilson & Henry 2008; Seale 2003: 518). Some authors have concluded rather positively that tabloidisation enables democratic participation in the public sphere through the popularisation of otherwise complex areas, thus drawing in more participants than in the case of long and nuanced scientific representations (Seale 2003: 519). On the other hand, Norman Fairclough (2015 [1989]: 80) finds that in the media rhetoric, contrasting representations, interpretations, and wordings express and serve the interests of society's power-holders, though they appear to be those of the newspaper.

We agree that it can be true in some cases. For example, in several Estonian and some Finnish test period articles about the corona crisis, divisive epithets were used to demarcate the roles of the respective persons – 'experts' (often

without any name or professional background listed) who represented the official medical interpretation of COVID-19 along with the respective preventative and curing methods, whereas ‘deniers’, ‘opposers’, and ‘believers’ signalled those using unacceptable alternative theories of the disease and/or alternative healing practices. For example, an Estonian article describing a TV debate was titled “Corona denier Jaya Shivani Kracht”, and had the following opening lines:

*Who are corona deniers and does their story contain even a single gram of truth? Why do people who seem to be intelligent and are well known doubt universally acknowledged truths? This week’s [i.e. 22 April] TV show ‘Pealtnägija’ confronts official experts and corona sceptics. (ÕL20-23/4)*

Later, a powerful danger symbol already familiar from previous years’ Estonian media debates comes into play when the article mentions that Kracht’s texts invite people to use MMS. Such symbols and epithets put the journalist in a power position, enabling them to create, against a backdrop of “universally acknowledged truths” and “official experts” (ÕL20-23/4), a demonised opponent. Certain repeated types of CAM (e.g. MMS, anti-vaccination) act as alarms that automatically connote danger and (semi-religious) extremism, thus experts are stereotypically cited as ‘fearing’ that CAM will cause harm, ‘warning’ of CAM and seeing it as ‘dangerous’ (also observable in ÕL2-1/4, ÕL12-11/4, PM4-8/4, IL13-27/4, etc.). Although warnings can indeed be justified in some respects, we agree here with Clive Seale, who exemplifies that the strongly negative depiction of certain groups or illnesses can increase respective fears in low-risk groups but tends to leave the opinions of high-risk groups unchanged (Seale 2002: 5).

Several other authors have also found that in the media rhetoric against alternative medicine, the accusation of being a believer is used as a rhetorical strategy to delegitimise opponents and imply that they are gullible (Caldwell 2017: 393) – thus believing is expressed here as a negation of reliance on accepted science and mainstream press (e.g., HS6-12/4 reporting that in some countries praying is the only form of healthcare). However, our material showed that in the case of an attractive personality or message, the representatives of alternativity can sometimes be given a voice in the media without any othering or demonising epithet, depending on the tonality of the article.

## **TONE, VOICE, AND AGENCY**

Although media studies have applied three categories – positive, negative, neutral – to describe the tonality of their sample articles (Taira 2014, 2019), it became clear on the basis of the Estonian material that articles about CAM

with completely neutral tonality are rare – either outright opinions or more implicit connotations contained in the text make them belong either under positive or negative tonality. Depending on the position on the positive-negative axis, sub-tonalities like ‘ironic-ridiculing’, ‘danger- and fear-mongering’, and ‘heroic-praising’ were observable, especially in the Estonian material. In the articles with negative tonality, the use of CAM is ascribed to simpleminded and gullible persons, e.g. in the recent years of the media debate against the use of MMS, the newspapers have repeatedly used epithets like “simpletons who believed that MMS was a miracle remedy” (Delfi 2019). Such media content resonates with online users’ commentaries, such as: “It’s hard to make clear to the stupid users that this substance is not meant for curing” or “If you are really so foolish and eat all kinds of stuff, the taxpayers should not pay for you when you need treatment – this money should come from the pocket of the fool” (ibid.). The Finnish material was often quite positive towards what we might characterise as secularised forms of CAM (particularly yoga and mindfulness) or CAM when reported in the context of feature stories. This positivity, however, could perhaps be further specified as positive-neutral since it was rather more appropriately described and reported (as part of a specific context or as practiced by the featured individual) than enthusiastically applauded.

Several studies show that the repeated tonality of media representation can indeed have a deciding role in directing real-life processes, as became clear in an article (Caldwell 2017: 380) that described how, in the years 1999–2009, media coverage of a vigorous campaign from scientists in the UK against the degree courses in homeopathy finally resulted in the expulsion of the courses from the curriculum (e.g. the constant use of rhetorical strategies stressing contrasts, such as rationality versus faith and logic versus magic, which had been used in media reports previously).<sup>3</sup> Caldwell also noticed a shift from positive to disparaging tonality in homeopathy descriptions when she compared media reports from 2007 and 2011 (2017: 394). However, even if much of our material was relatively pro-science, conventional medicine is not always described more positively than CAM. The authors of an analytical survey of UK media reports (four daily newspapers on four randomly chosen days) on medicine found that coverage of CAM was much more positive than coverage of mainstream medicine (Ernst & Weihmayr 2000: 707).

Understandably, the media usually does not bother to offer comprehensive definitions of CAM but still gives clear, often absolutising hints about what CAM is and which types of CAM are acceptable or dangerous, although such differentiations can vary from one report to another (e.g. based on the tonality of a given report) and over the course of time. Additionally, in our material, there were some approaches that were considered more alternative in media

reports – e.g., energy healing, MMS use, coronavirus denying, and the anti-vaccine movement, some of which have developed into powerful media and colloquial catchwords with negative connotations (e.g., dubbing people who are not following conventional quarantine rules as *kovidioodid* (cov-idiots) in Estonia). Less alternative and bordering on mainstream practices were various vitamin and antioxidant complexes, yoga, mindfulness, chiropractic, acupuncture – although, in Estonian media, more so than in Finnish, some representations of yoga stressed the mystic features (e.g. fire practices of a yoga master).

Depending on the tonality of the article, well-known practitioners of CAM can be depicted as having extraordinary skills or being stupid and unscientific. We also observed that in the case of negative media representations, practitioners were less directly quoted than in positive representations. In the test period, Estonian newspaper *Õhtuleht* launched a positively connoted web TV series titled *Särtsuminutid* (Minutes of zing/energy shot) with a charming ‘health guru’ who gave exercise instructions. Such emblematic depictions do not leave space for the possibility that a person can act differently in various situations and roles or that the use of CAM can vary from person to person – for some users being a rather technical or medical aid tool, for others a sacred means. Another Estonian example is well-known astrologist Igor Mang, who was heavily condemned in the media in 2018 because of a harassment affair, yet he was again depicted as a hero and given more voice in the media during the COVID-19 crisis in relation to allegedly having been able to foretell the pandemic.

## **BOUNDARY-WORK**

### **Scientific-unscientific debate**

Boundary-work between CAM and science was very much present in the material from both countries, and one of the most common conflict lines in media discussions on CAM lies on the axis of scientific-unscientific (cf. Saks 2011 [1999]: 381, who notes in the context of England that this rhetoric axis has occurred in medical disputes since the nineteenth century).

As was shown above in the context of Estonian corona deniers, the rhetoric and metaphors of unscientificity and stupidity are often combined with the language of danger and criminality. For example, Estonian Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik, in a 2019 interview, called alternative curing methods in general *uhhuu-meditiin* (mumbo-jumbo medicine), and his words were also widely shared in the media (e.g. in newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* (Vedler & Moora 2019)). Both Estonian and Finnish articles from the test period mentioned

alternative approaches such as “humbug” or “mumbo-jumbo” (ÕL3-1/4; IL7-17/4; HS8-15/4; A11-29/4). Stressing that modern biomedicine, in comparison with alternative medicine, is scientific, provides a pivotal axis for distinguishing it from primitive and outmoded alternative therapies (c.f. Saks 2011 [1999]: 386). More positive boundary-work was underway when mindfulness and meditation were often clearly placed on the side of science and depicted as distinct from religion, and this was supported by giving voice to scientific and intellectual authorities.

However, research has not found a real correlation between CAM and low education (see, e.g., Ruggie 2004: 55). On the contrary, recent research on the use of CAM in Europe reports more interest among the population with a higher socioeconomic position (Kemppainen et al. 2018: 454), and some interviews conducted in Estonia showed that there are no CAM users who would use all types of CAM, despite the impression created by the media that corona deniers, vaccination opposers, and all others build a homogenous ‘other’ against a scientific worldview.

### **CAM and religion debate**

In recent decades, several healing systems that are originally rooted in a particular cultural-religious tradition have become available in a global marketplace, whereby the media often serves as the first introducer of respective information. However, in public discussions, overtly spiritual and esoteric topics are still mostly met with scepticism and disdain (see a similar observation in Uibu 2013: 14; Koski 2016: 19–21), and CAM practices grounded in new spiritualities or modern forms of religiosity often give rise to jokes and parodies (cf., e.g., Heelas 2008: 12), as has been the case with corona pandemics. Some well-known medical scientists have therefore denied any reason for CAM, considering it rather a religious matter (ibid.). The boundaries between alternative medical approaches and broader philosophical-esoteric worldviews tend to be fuzzy, and the media often depicts CAM in relation to religious beliefs. However, simple herbal cures like linden blossom tea for fever are not presented as CAM, but rather pragmatic folk wisdom which connotes a naturalness that in media rhetoric is mostly deemed safe (cf. Ernst 2008: 528).

In Estonian and Finnish media, there were several forms of CAM in which the scientific, medical, and psychological language use was interwoven with religious vocabulary, signifying certain spiritual worldviews, concepts, and practices. This tendency became clear even with illustrations – both Estonian and Finnish newspaper articles representing views of conventional medicine were



often illustrated with photographs of people in white medical attire, microscopes or the magnified virus; however, especially in Estonian cases, descriptions of CAM were illustrated by ethno-religious symbols, connoting (exoticised) closeness to religious and spiritual ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In our April test period, Estonian media especially published articles describing traditional folk-medicine and magic-based reactions to COVID-19 (e.g., PM1-1/4 about drinking cow's urine). In the Finnish material, we found the contrast built between countries that believe in high-level hygiene and those in which "healthcare and the whole society function very much on prayer alone" (HS6-12/4). However, metaphysical or religious backgrounds of certain types of CAM are also represented in articles with positive tonality (e.g., stressing the long traditions of Ayurveda or Chinese medicine). Yet, in negative representations, even 'soft' therapies may be called 'voodoo' or their practitioners 'sectarians', which, in an overtly secular society, creates a strong pejorative contrast effect. Remarkably, the word 'humbug' was used by critics as well as proponents and practitioners of CAM, thus indicating interesting cultural rhetorical negotiation.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES**

Our comparison showed that mainstream Estonian mass media reports on CAM matters more frequently and with longer articles than Finnish media, but CAM is still visible in the media in both countries. There was a relatively equal number of findings in the two countries (57 in Estonia and 51 in Finland). In shorter reports with an informative focus as well as longer narrative reports, limited contrasting pairs of metaphors and rhetoric occurred, emphasising a sharp divide between scientific biomedicine and CAM. However, polls and interviews show that the majority of Estonian population uses both approaches, yet the proportion and grade of alternativeness may vary from rather 'soft' approaches (e.g. reading a magic health spell when giving antibiotics to a child) to 'hard' ones (e.g. using poisonous substances or refusing biomedicine in favour of the services of miracle healers). Our Finnish material gave significant space to scientifically legitimated forms of CAM (yoga and meditation and especially mindfulness) but contrasted some other forms of CAM very strongly with science. At the same time, a growing number of doctors themselves offer alternative therapies (usually certain limited types) or approve their use by patients (see a similar observation in Saks 2011 [1999]: 393; Uibu & Vihalemm 2017: 344). Thus, the coexistence of CAM and conventional medicine is obviously greater than the media suggests.

As for types of information, reports on CAM (including folk medicine) are much more frequently than reports on conventional medicine presented as entertainment or danger, the information tends to be given in the form of archetypical folk tale oppositions, and there are relatively few articles with an informative function or neutral tone. Such ways of information dissemination can make CAM journalistically more attractive than conventional medicine, e.g. some types of CAM are presented as a privilege, luxury or pleasure (e.g. with manual therapies, the aspects of pleasure and cure coexist). In comparison with reports on conventional medicine, the CAM toolkit contains more “symbols, stories, rituals and world-views” (Swidler 1986: 273) and employs the aspects of empowerment, emotional care, and mysticism, which are also depicted in media presentations. Thus, CAM can be framed as medicine as well as religion, entertainment or a scandal, having more versatile journalistic potential than conventional medicine.

On the other hand, the medicalisation of the body occurs in reports related to conventional medicine as well as CAM – quite normal bodily functions and conditions are presented as needing a cure (e.g., occasional feeling of energy loss or decreased interest in sex, feeling low during the COVID-19 quarantine). Such conditions tend to get more media attention than serious chronic diseases like cancer (cf. a similar observation in Kline 2006: 47).

Reception studies often presume that consumers are easily suggestible by the media. Kline concludes, based on a 10-year survey period of studies on health media representations, that popular media is not likely to facilitate understanding that is helpful to individuals coping with health challenges (Kline 2006: 44). Distributing ambivalent signals in the media and representing CAM one-sidedly is indeed potentially misleading, as health-related media content doubtlessly has a role and impact in forming the users’ attitudes. However, it is unjustified to assume a straightforward process according to which positive CAM reports would increase their use and negative reports would stop people from using CAM. For example, it is unlikely that anybody in Estonia or Finland would ever try extreme health behaviours from faraway cultures, which were described in our media sample (e.g. eating cat and dog meat, drinking cow’s urine), even if these were presented in a less condemned way. Decisions to move from passive interest into actual one-time or repeated CAM use are based on much more complex information processing (e.g. consulting Internet forums, talking to friends and relatives and hearing their personal success or horror stories, personal short-time testing). Even articles with negative connotations have an informative role that may trigger a person to seek further information, eventually leading to experimentation with a certain form of CAM, but also to withdrawal.

Insofar, only few authors acknowledge the need for more audience reception studies (e.g., Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 8; see also a detailed reception study by Passalacqua et al. 2004) in order to find out about actual reception patterns in various groups (e.g., the patterns seem to vary in the case of serious chronic illnesses like cancer, compared with healthy persons who use CAM mainly because of a certain worldview and/or lifestyle). For example, several sample cases (e.g. negative media representation of corona deniers in Estonia) have shown that media witch hunts of certain alternative practitioners or substances may lead to even stronger support of these among respective communities and bring in new members. Therefore, media reception studies are one of the future perspectives to concentrate on. It would be especially interesting to conduct such research in a comparative research design and investigate the kind of similar and dissimilar attributions and orientations we would find in two or more societies.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This research was supported by the projects PUTJD962 (funded by the Estonian Research Council), TK-145 (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies through the European Regional Development Fund), EKM 8-2/20/3 and EKKD65 (Estonian Ministry of Education and Research).

## **SOURCES**

PM – newspaper *Postimees*, April 2020  
ÕL – newspaper *Õhtuleht*, April 2020  
NL – women’s weekly *Naisteleht*, April 2020  
HS – newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 2020  
IL – tabloid *Iltalehti*, April 2020  
A – women’s weekly *Anna*, April 2020

## **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Cf. an Australian study finding that 81.3 percent of representations of CAM in Australian women’s magazines were positive (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671).
- <sup>2</sup> This is comparable to Taira’s findings (2014) when he studied religion in Finnish newspapers: religion was present frequently, but mostly mentioned insignificantly.
- <sup>3</sup> For relatively similar cases from Finland in the case of nursing training, see Vuolanto (2013).

<sup>4</sup> However, CAM is not viewed in a religious context everywhere; e.g. Dunne and Phillips (2010: 671) point to a sample of three Australian women's magazines that were analysed over a period of a few months in 2008, in which the media representations generally suggested that CAM "works in ways analogous to orthodox treatments" (ibid.). These authors also noted that their material contained very little coverage of types of CAM that use radically different notions of aetiology or illness, such as Ayurveda or QiGong (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673, see a similar observation in cancer-related media content in Australia by Mercurio & Elliott 2011: 67). Supposedly because of representations similar to conventional medicine, there were no grounds to oppose CAM to orthodox medicine (see also Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673). Another author found that a general tendency in mass print magazines in the USA and Canada since 1980 has been the persistence of a biomedical perspective in articles about CAM; however, the proportion of articles on CAM increased twofold by the end of the second decade (Clarke et al. 2010: 127).

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