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## Local Letters to Newspapers – digital history project

### Introduction

*The Local Letters to Newspapers* is a digital history project of the Academy of Finland Centre of Excellence in the History of Experiences HEX (2018–2025), hosted by University of Tampere. The objective is to make a new kind of digital research material available from the 19th and the early 20th century Finnish society. The aim is to introduce a database of the readers' letters submitted to the Finnish press that could be studied both qualitatively and quantitatively. The database will allow analyzing the 19th and 20th century global reality through a case study of the Finnish society. It will enable a wide range of research topics and open a path to various research approaches, especially the study of human experiences.

### Local letters to newspapers

Our focus is on the letters to newspapers. They were the letters sent to the press by the readers of the newspapers. They were usually written in the name of the parish, from which the letter was sent, and the name of the parish was used as a title. Therefore, an individual writer represented a whole parish. That is a reason why in this project these letters are called *local letters*.

These kind of letters told usually about every day local things that had happened in some parish. Usually, the topics included information about yields, the state of health of the inhabitants and curious incidents. However, there were also abstract reasoning on topics like for example, what is society, publicity or individual.

There are a hundreds of thousands of these kind of letters written by both Finnish and Swedish in the Finnish press merely in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They covered a large part of the print sheets of the whole Finnish-speaking press especially in the mid-1800s. The great number of the local letters were published because the early journalists of the Finnish-speaking press worked only part-time. That is why they were happy to accept a great number of letters to their readers and publish them. In the 1850s and 1860s, the letters to the editor increased to the significant phenomenon. There is a calculation that in the 1847–65 there were at least 2500 writers of these letters. That is a significant number because for example in the 1847 there were only about 1000 and in the 1860 10000 subscriptions. (Tommila 1988) Therefore the readers wrote a large part of the early Finnish press and indeed these local letters were a reason why people began to subscribe and read more and more newspapers.

There is not accurate knowledge of the social status of the writers of the letters, because many of them used pseudonyms. There is a careful estimation, that 40 percent of the identified writers were either peasants or came from the lower social layer. That means that the letters are a good source for “history-from-below” perspective. Indeed, the local letters are the first a source of this kind in

the Finnish-speaking culture, because almost the whole central administration of Finland worked in Swedish until to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The projects main criteria for the “local letter” are:

1. The letters are sent from the local stage to the publicity that is a “translocal” stage. (Excludes for example the notices of administration)
2. The length of the writing makes an experience visible. (Excludes for example the short news flashes)

#### Database of local letters - Possibilities for qualitative and quantitative analysis

The Local Letters to Newspapers -digital project is constructing a database with the tools provided by the Digital Collections of National Library of Finland. The Scrapbook -tool in the National library’s digital collections website allows collecting the cuttings to the database of the project. When the database is ready, this enables the searches that will cover only the local letters and exclude the other newspaper material. This opens the path to do the qualitative “cross-sections” to the whole press in the different time eras. Therefore, this creates a change to analyse some particular historical phenomenon as well as the language itself, for example conceptual history.

There is also a possibility to approach these local letters quantitatively. The background data of the letters could be converted to Excel -mode. This makes possible to group these local letters by the name of the parishes. This enables the study of the societal distribution of the local letters and thus shed light on the societal significance of this phenomenon. It could be for example studied, from where the letters were sent in a particular era.

#### The old Article index (collected in 1890–1909)

There is an existing index of these local letters that is collected at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This old index originally included 380 000 little hand-written filing cards that are in the file boxes. A part of the hand-written index was typewritten and microfilmed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they were digitalized and published online by the national library of Finland. <https://digi.kansalliskirjasto.fi/sanomalehti/directory>

Unfortunately, this originally hand-written index is not complete. There are many blank spots and repetition on it. The criteria of the picking the articles also changed remarkable during a long almost 20-year period of the collect work. That is why this old index is not reliable enough for the quantitative scientific analysis in particular.

Nevertheless, the benefit of this old index is that there are the descriptions of the local letters to newspapers. These originally hand written descriptions outline the content of every indexed letter. The Local Letters to Newspapers -digital project will combine these descriptions of the old Article index with the new Database of Local Letters with the digital technology. This combines the technologies of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century and provides a new kind of data to the historical research.

See more information about this old Article index (in Finnish): <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/scriptaselecta/2017/07/13/digitaalisten-aineistojen-artikkelihakemiston-historiasta/>

### [Open access & Data management](#)

The project has a plan to make the Local Letters to Newspapers -database fully available online for free. The first release will be the period from the beginning of the Finnish press to the year 1870. In the long perspective, the objective is to continue the database to the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

We believe that in any extent, the database will provide a great material for many kinds of historical study, because it allows to use the Finnish society as a case study for global approaches. In that way, the database will serve disciplines like social history, history from below, conceptual history, cultural history or local history.

There are also plans for crowdsourcing the work. The writers who wrote the local letters often used pseudonyms. That is why the identification of the writers is often difficult. Different researchers have different fragments of information about the people behind these pseudonyms. The plan is to join these pieces of information by introducing the public forum to the web, which allows the debate about local letters and especially the writers of the letters. This crowdsourced knowledge could thus be transferred as an entry to the database of local letters.

### [Current situation of the project](#)

The project is in its starting phase. We are currently recruiting a research assistant whose task will be to collect the local letters to newspapers to the database. In future, there are plans to use computer and OCR reading in this collecting process.