

Media and Mass Communication Research Past, Present and Future

Reflections from a Nordic Horizon

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Abstract

Research on media and mass communication has been in a state of constant flux for some 50 years. Scholars in the Humanities have traditionally studied the meaning of human expression in language, philosophy, the Arts and literature. Social scientists have focused on the relations between media institutions and other institutions, not least political ones. With the so-called 'cultural turn' in the 1980s, media scholars' interest shifted to the role of media in the development of culture, on the potential of media to generate meaning in a broader sense, and on the adaptation of media messages to culturally dominant forms of understanding. Today, the field is characterized by extreme diversity and extensive specialization. Studies on the systems level are few. At the same time, contemporary multicultural and global societies raise more complex issues than ever before. Given the high degree of specialization, scholars in the field may not be exposed to the impulses needed for them to be able to formulate incisive research problems. For the discipline to produce new insights and new knowledge requires collaboration – within the discipline, but above all collaboration across academic as well as national frontiers.

Key Words: media studies, historical perspective, international collaboration, collaboration between disciplines

Introduction

The character and directions of academic inquiry are ever-changing. Old subjects evolve, their influence waxes and wanes; new subjects emerge. All as the result of many different intellectual and social processes on different levels – national, regional and international. The field of Media and Communication is a relative young discipline; many of us have first-hand experience of its gestation and birth.

The study of media and mass communication has evolved steadily since the 1950s. Changes in contemporary political systems, the cross-fertilization or conflict of different cultures, the development of social institutions and organizations, not to mention new information technologies, have influenced the development of the discipline significantly.

The number of scholars in the field of Media and Communication Research has increased dramatically during the last decade, and some excellent research communities have been created. But, there are aspects that arouse some critical reflections – most of

which concern whether and to what extent the work in our field raises relevant questions about the relations between media and society.

An attunement of research to the agendas – and even the interests – of new systems of public grants, external financiers and, furthermore, new structures for higher education has thrust scientific inquiry into a period of change. Research tends to be more administrative, and short-term perspectives prevail at the expense of the long-term accumulation of knowledge. Too little time is devoted to academic debate and critique; there is no “career value” in such undertakings. The leeway for independence and the freedom to utter unpleasant truths have diminished – perhaps not formally, but *de facto*.

The pressures at play in this overall trend may well have more far-reaching consequences for a relatively “new” field of research like Media and Communication than in older and more established disciplines.

The Emergence of the Discipline in the Nordic Countries

Modern Media and Communication Research has its roots in a variety of disciplines: Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Psychology, History, Literature and Linguistics. Within these fields, questions relating to mass media had tended to be marginalised. Serious gaps in knowledge had opened concerning how the external manifestations of media and communication related to their inner life, and to the place the institutions occupy in our societies and cultures. This, just as television was becoming an ubiquitous household fixture and computers had started their conquest. The frustration relating to these ‘white spots on the map’ spurred the creation of the discipline of Media and Communication Research on eminently interdisciplinary foundations. Behind the urge to create a specialised discipline was the desire to strengthen the field through the elaboration of shared concepts, theoretical starting points and methods.

Some of the scholars who were active in the 1970s and 1980s – today we call them pioneers – worked hard to establish Media and Communication as a discipline in its own right. Among the pioneer generation were researchers like Sverre Høyer and Helge Østbye in Norway; Karl-Erik Rosengren, Kjell Nowak, Olof Hultén, Stig Hadenius and Lennart Weibull in Sweden; and Frands Mortensen, Erik Nordahl Svendsen and Karen Siune in Denmark. All were aided and abetted from time to time by Kaarle Nordenstreng in Finland, where Journalism and Mass Communication had been an academic discipline since the 1940s.

Many of these researchers also founded training programmes for journalists and information officers in an era when demand for professionals in these areas skyrocketed.

Other main actors were the national associations of media researchers, all of which were formed toward the end of the 1970s. These may be seen as an outgrowth of Nordic collaboration, which has a history of some 30-40 years, having first been manifested in a pan-Nordic conference for media and communication research held in 1973 at the Voksenåsen outside Oslo. That same year saw the decision to establish a Nordic documentation center for media and communication research, NORDICOM. Clearly, Nordic collaboration in the area was a chief prerequisite to the development of the discipline in the Nordic countries. This Nordic base provided, and continues to provide, a much more conducive platform for research than any of the five countries alone can offer.

Nordic research collaboration also benefited from Nordic researchers’ active involvement in the IAMCR/AIERI (International Association for Mass Communication Research) and its regularly recurring conferences in the 1970s. Nearly all the so-called

pioneers were present in Leipzig in 1974, which marked a definite step in the history of the Association. And then there was Leicester 1976, Warsaw 1978 ...

It is no mere coincidence that the Swedish association was formed on the way home from Leicester, and the Norwegian association at the conference in Warsaw. In retrospect it is interesting to see how several different factors, especially regional and international processes, coalesced to make an extraordinary national expansion possible. Still, without the entrepreneurial efforts of individual researchers it would not have happened.

And then...?

In the Nordic region, research and education in Media and Communication were finally unified in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The process took place more or less simultaneously, in a variety of academic departments, some in the Social Sciences, others in the Humanities. This was the case in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The exception was Finland, as earlier mentioned, where Journalism and Mass Communication, and Communication Studies, respectively, had been independent and well-established disciplines for many years.

Viewed in historical perspective, media researchers in the Social Sciences and media researchers in the Humanities for many years kept their distance from one another in terms of theory and methodology. In the Humanities, the focus has often rested on the meaning of human expression from the perspective of Linguistics, Philosophy, the Arts and Literature. The social scientists have, for their part, occupied themselves more with the media institutions and their relations with other institutions, particularly those having to do with democracy, and the effects and comprehension of mediated messages. Whereas methodology has long been a pivotal concern within the Social Sciences, it has been relatively peripheral in the Humanities. For many years, a 'front line' ran through the Nordic research community, dividing those who applied quantitative methods from those who used qualitative.

New disciplines like Media and Communication Research find themselves in something of a dilemma. On the one hand, they seek to develop a discipline that merits national and international recognition; on the other, they want to remain open and non-doctrinaire in their relations with neighbouring disciplines. Often, however, the institutionalisation of a research field, particularly in its early phases, implies a risk of a block in communication with other disciplines – which occurred in the case of Media and Communication Research. The developmental phase coincided, what is more, with a new direction in work in the Humanities known as 'the cultural turn'.

The 'cultural turn' represented a development that brought social scientists and their colleagues in the Humanities closer. Scholars in the field increasingly trained their focus on the roles media play in cultural processes, on the media's potential to create meaning in a broader sense, and on the adaptation of media messages to modes of understanding commonly applied to cultural phenomena. Nowadays it is no longer always easy to tell the difference between work in the two traditions. The concept of *text* became central in almost every sense of the word. We may speak of a process of hybridisation in some regions of the field. The 'cultural turn' has had a far stronger impact on media studies than on many other fields. The outcome, however, has not been greater unity of focus, but rather the opposite, and in retrospect we may ask: In an era when issues relating to the power and morality of media institutions were more urgently im-

portant than ever before, where were the social scientists – why were they so quiet? Was it because they were busy pursuing consensus in the field, or was it because of ‘marketisation’? Or, were they simply totally absorbed in the *Zeitgeist*?

For a young discipline in which most researchers nowadays have their background solely in Media and Communication Research and where contacts with early media research and work in neighbouring disciplines are few, “trends” can have an exceedingly strong impact and may lead to widespread conformism. Some critics have lamented the lack of historical perspectives in much of contemporary Media and Communication Research. The wheel has been re-invented, time and again. Researchers tend to develop a nose for trends and for what is politically correct. In this way it is entirely possible for a field of research to be characterised at once by conformism and multidisciplinary or, perhaps more aptly, eclecticism.

Media and communication researchers borrow theories, perspectives and methods from other disciplines. Many doctoral dissertations of recent vintage refer – often without much reflection – to a handful of theories garnered from more general cultural and social theory. The works take their inspiration from one, often even several methodologies, without pausing to consider that methods, too, are founded on basic assumptions about the nature of the object to be explored. (Höijer 2006)

Scholars in our field have always borrowed and will surely continue to borrow, due to the nature of the phenomena they concern themselves with. Borrowing in itself should not disqualify us from making the occasional contribution to the development of theory and methodology in other disciplines, but the record to date shows remarkably few such contributions. What is more, we find that issues relating to the media are today being studied in many different disciplines, independent of what has been done, or is being done by researchers in Media and Communication.

Media and Communication is variegated in the extreme, and few syntheses embrace the field as a whole. The field is broad, specialities are many, with new ones appearing from time to time. Indeed, the field can give the impression of incoherence. Specialisation, which is not always solidly founded in theory or methodology, may cause the field to disintegrate into small groups, each a discursive community unto itself. Members’ credibility within the community increases, all the while their work is marginalised in relation to the research community at large.

The burgeoning flora of journals these days mirrors the situation. Commercial publishing houses have caught the scent and flocked to the arena. New research specialities are carved out and new journal titles started up all the time. As a consequence, there is a risk that our field may become ‘balkanized’ to an even greater extent. Furthermore, the rapid increase in seeming diversity may well – as in many other cases of rapid expansion – result in redundant and repetitive publication. Which, in turn, implies a risk that perceptions of academic standards will continue to vary, and with them the quality of published work. Variation in standards is not to be confused with a healthy variety of interests, points of departure, concepts and methods, without which the discipline cannot thrive. Theoretical and methodological pluralism needs to be deliberately cultivated, and this requires competitive interaction between qualitative research environments.

The frantic hunt for research funding, increasing pressures to publish in international journals, and far-reaching specialisation – on a market that has become increasingly trend-sensitive – are not unrelated. Thought, reconsideration, and reflection are scarce in day-to-day academic life. Monographs, as demanding of the scholar’s time and effort as they are important to our science, are not profitable ventures.

Specialisation with studies of high quality is not a problem in itself, but it can be problematic unless accompanied by inquiry on a systems level. Without these latter studies, we have no knowledge of the whole to which we can relate the various parts. There is a risk that extreme specialisation may lose its fertility for lack of impulses and an inability to formulate new problems of relevance. Today, there is not much in the way of a media philosophy that can unite findings and theories. The lack of such a philosophy can hamper progress in our field.

Media and communication researchers face some real challenges today. In the world of multilevel governance with private and public actors media landscapes and media cultures are undergoing fundamental and far-reaching metamorphoses. Not to mention the ramifications of phenomena like ICT, media convergence and global media structures.

How to bridge the digital – or more correctly – the knowledge divide is a topic of considerable attention even for media researchers. The main question is the gap between north and south. The gap between the rich and poor still prevails as a result of disparities in access to resources, knowledge and technology, especially in rural areas. But, the divide is also reproduced within virtually every country of the world and often reflects other gaps – those between income groups, the sexes and ethnic groups.

We need to better understand how media and communication may be used, both as tools and as a way of articulating processes of development and social change, improving everyday lives and empowering people to influence their own lives and those of their fellow community members (Hemer and Tufte 2005).

In this digital age it is easy to marginalize traditional media as radio, newspapers, journals and books, and fail to confront critical issues such as the lack of media freedom in many parts of the world, the rising global concentration of private media ownership, the absence of media legislation and the challenges facing public service media.

We also have reason to ask questions about media with a focus on gender and the gender order. The media mirror reality, yes, but they also contribute to constructing hegemonic definitions that all too frequently are depicted as self-evident – as natural, all-pervasive and invisible as the air we breathe.

The research community also bears a responsibility for the cultivation of media and information literacy in society at large. A precondition for a good layman's understanding of the media is new knowledge and the communication of that knowledge. *Media literacy* means understanding how mass media work, how they create reality and produce meaning, how the media are organized, and knowing how to use them wisely. Proponents of media literacy view greater knowledge of the media and communication in society as contributing to participation, active citizenship, development and life-long learning.

With the growing convergence of radio, TV and computer technologies, including the emergence of various hybrids and specializations, we see how a variety of electronic media, information and communication is gradually becoming common goods. Interactive media like the Internet also imply invitations to risky behaviour in connection with media use. The time for simple media effects approaches has passed. Instead, the issues of media content and media use need to be contextualised in a multifactor, risk-based framework as concluded by several researchers (Hargrave and Livingstone 2006). Traditional media literacy is no longer sufficient. There is a need to develop new skills and competencies that render users and consumers 'information literate'. Media literacy has tended to focus on cultural expression and has a critical dimension that information lit-

eracy lacks. Recently, however, information literacy is increasingly connected to issues of democracy and active citizenship. There is a need to bring the two forms of literacy together. (Livingstone, van Couvering and Thumim 2006)

Time to Regain the Initiative – Nationally, Regionally and Internationally

In our attempts to comprehend and explain contemporary reality we sometimes find the tools at our disposal too mechanical, too blunt and unidimensional. It has proved easier to ask *what* and *how* than to ask *why*. How, then, can Media and Communication Research meet these challenges?

We need a good dose of critical self-examination, where we consider the relevance of the questions we formulate, where we are more judicious in our choice of theoretical perspectives and more conscious of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the methods at hand, and where we evaluate the validity of our findings and the conclusions we draw from them (Höijer 2006).

And, we definitely need more collaboration – within our field and with other disciplines. We need to learn more from one other, to share knowledge and context. Collaboration between disciplines and collaboration across national frontiers, with the aim of enriching the research environment, is vital to the development of fruitful discursive communities. Research communities themselves need to create platforms to achieve long-term goals through national, regional and international collaboration.

Internationalization is both enriching and necessary in the multicultural and global world of today as it is with regard to scholars' interest in broader, more all-inclusive paradigms. We need comparative studies in order to shed light on important issues. We have to build on past work but break new ground. We need fresh, unexpected insights and new comparative research questions. We need to develop analytical frameworks that will guide comparative analysis of media systems. Without comparative studies we run an obvious risk that certain factors will grow out of proportion. And we have to be able to point to possible areas and strategies for future research.

But, we also have to maintain and further develop national and regional collaboration, not least as a means to ensure that internationalization does not take place at the expense of knowledge about, and reflection on, scholars' own societies and cultures. Fruitful national and regional dialogues are a great boon in international exchanges and vice versa.

The overall objective must be to enable our research field to answer questions about the role of media with regard to the distribution of power and influence in our societies, in addition to questions relating to media content and the role of media in everyday life. We should not lose sight of the fact that, *power*, *identity* and *inequality* are still concepts of vital relevance in media and communication research (Golding 2005). The outcome of this process will depend on our degree of involvement in discourses outside our institutions and closest circles.

It is time to regain the initiative – nationally, regionally and internationally. And, we must dare to do more. That is, enter a new phase in the development of our knowledge about media and communication, where we raise our level of ambition so that the diversity and richness of Media and Communication Research as a field may bear fruit and inspire other disciplines. So that we, in an age when the media are among the strongest influences in our societies, do not by default leave science-based media philosophy and media criticism to others.

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