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DOES MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Reflections from a Nordic Horizon

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Does Media and Communication Research Make a Difference? Reflections from a Nordic Horizon

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The field of Media and Communication Research has been brought under critical, and self-critical examination many times over the years. Column-meters of critique have filled anthologies and journals. These words by Bernard Berelson's – appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly* as early as 1959 – 55 years ago. Berelson is indicating stagnation and that the glory days of media research is over.

In sum, then, it seems to me that "the great ideas" that gave the field of communication research so much vitality ten and twenty years ago have to a substantial extent worn out. No new ideas of comparable magnitude have appeared to take their place. We are on a plateau of research development, and have been for some time. There are two ways to look at this phenomenon, assuming that it is correctly gauged. One is to regret that no new "breakthrough" has developed in recent years; the other is to be grateful that the field has a period of time to assimilate, incorporate, and exploit the imaginative innovations of the major figures. The reader reads the journals; he can take his choice.

Bernard Berelson in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring,1959)

To this, Wilbur Schramm protested and presented a challenging set of important current problems regarding media and communication:

Communication research may be already old enough for us to talk about the great times that used to be, and the giants that once walked the earth, as Dr. Berelson talks about them. But I find it an extraordinarily vital field at the moment, with a competent and intellectually eager group of young researchers facing a challenging set of problems. Who will make the adequate two-person model of communication we need? Who will analyze the communication organization? Who will clarify the economics of mass communication? Who will make sense of the communication "system"? Who will untangle the skein of motivations and gratifications related to mass media use on which a long line of distinguished researchers, including Dr. Berelson, have worked? Who will find out what television is doing to children or, better, what children do with television? Who is going to clarify the diffusion of ideas in a society, or the relation of public opinion to political process? Let's go on with the problems! Wilbur Schramm "The State of Communication Research: Comment", in the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring, 1959)

And it was Schramm's opinion not Berelson's that guided scholars in the Nordic countries in the 1960s.

The American research had a decisive influence on Nordic social scientist, who after the second world war saw many social science institutions at U.S. universities take a quantum leap to become powerhouses of research - often in a positivistic tradition. And, generously funded scholarship programs, welcomed foreign scholars with open arms. As a result, social scientists, from many Nordic universities spent some time in the U.S. research community. And several of them met in USA – and some of them began to talk and inspired each other -

and not least their graduate students. Here we find a seed for the upcoming Nordic cooperation initiated in the stage between 1960's and 1970's.

Three days in June 1973 some seventy academics and also policy-makers and media professionals gathered in Voksenåsen outside Oslo to discuss questions of an existential nature: "Where do we stand, where are we going, what kind of influence does what we do have, what do we aspire to do, and which allies, which adversaries define our function in a broader social context?" The majority of the participants were researchers, and they came from roughly a dozen different disciplines. Others were politicians and representatives of the media industry.

Among the key speakers at the meeting were Kaarle Nordenstreng, wellknown from this Department at the University of Tampere, who spoke about "Normative Directions for Mass Communication Research", and Kjell Nowak, from the Stockholm School of Economics, who spoke about "Models for Mass Communication: In what context should the phenomenon be studied?" Another main theme during the meeting was "Media research, to whose benefit?" The report from the meeting was entitled *Media Research: Communication and Social Responsibility* (Medieforskning: Kommunikasjon og samfunnsansvar).

Researchers from Denmark, Norway and Sweden, returned home with a dream of a discipline of their own, - something the Finnish researchers had since many years. So, Finland offered a model for the other Nordic countries. Finland was in this regard even a pioneer in Europe.

The policy-makers and media people who participated in the conference hoped for results from the academic community that might help them come to grips with a new media landscape.

The advent of television in the 1960s drew attention to the roles media play in society and to the conditions under which media operate – and, in extension, to the 'logic' of the media. The media landscape was transformed, and a new media culture emerged that had ramifications for both family life and social relations. These effects were amplified by the emergence of an unprecedented 'culture of youth' in a new socio-economic reality. All this, in turn, produced a number of new media genres. The terms of competition among media were fundamentally altered, which aroused concern about the effects of media on their audiences – young audiences in particular – in many quarters.

And 'Information' was a mantra in the public and private sectors alike.

This was also in an era when our universities were rapidly expanding. New questions for research were raised, which had a lot to do with developments in the fields of Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, Economic History, Linguistics, the Arts and Philosophy. Old

theories and methods were revisited; new ones were elaborated – even in the Nordic countries.

Voksenåsen 1973 marked a distinct turning point – and a starting point for vital Nordic collaboration within media and communication research.

These developments were largely the doings of a number of pioneers who by today's standards were extremely versatile in their research interests, readily shifting between 'micro' and 'macro'.

But, there was another key factor, as well. The founding and growth of the discipline was steered by a strong demand for new knowledge and competence on the part of both policy-makers and the industry. From its inception, media and communication research had a highly normative streak - especially in Sweden and Norway.

These, then, were factors that broke ground and cleared the way for the institutionalization of 'media and communication' in our colleges and universities in the Scandinavian countries.

There is yet another factor that should not be lost sight of. It is difficult to speak of the Nordic collaboration without speaking about Nordicom, the Nordic information center for media and communication research – the lives of *the Nordic Media Research Conference* and *Nordicom* are closely interwoven. Nordicom was founded the same year as the meeting in Voksenåsen. Started as a documentation center for Nordic research literature, over the years Nordicom has grown into a knowledge center for users throughout the Nordic region, Europe and the world – owned by the Nordic researchers themselves. The research done here in the Nordic countries was no longer a mainly local concern; through Nordicom its reach became worldwide - today Nordicom only lacks users in three countries: Libya, Western Sahara and Tadjikistan.

A fruitful interaction between national, Nordic and international research arenas

Together, the Nordic research conferences and Nordicom constituted an arena that was large enough to constitute a 'critical mass' that allowed the development of the discipline at national level. It was not possible otherwise in any one of the countries at that time – and again: with the exception of Finland, where Journalism and Mass Communication, and Communication Studies, respectively, had been independent and well-established disciplines for many years. But, also for Finland the Nordic collaboration resulted in considerable influences and vice versa.

Two major assets going into this Nordic collaboration were, of course, a longstanding sense of kindredness among the Nordic countries and the similarities of our media systems. Nor should we underestimate the advantage of some degree of understanding of each other's languages, albeit far from universal. And not least, we should remind ourselves that the 1970s were still a time of post-war 'Nordism'.

Nordic research collaboration also benefited from Nordic researchers' active involvement in IAMCR (International Association for Mass Communication Research) and the organization's regularly recurring conferences. Nearly all the Nordic "pioneer researchers" were present at the conference in Leipzig in 1974, which marked a definite step in the history of the Association.

The meetings of the 1970s addressed major issues of the time. Nordic researchers formed a striking contingent at international meetings, and they signed the spirit of the times: 'Mass Media and Socialization' in Leipzig; 'Mass Media and Man's View of Society' in Leicester 1976; and 'Mass Media and National Cultures' in Warsaw 1978.

It is hardly 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, worked together to make an extraordinary national expansion possible.

An interplay of national, regional and international processes was decisive for the development of the discipline in the Nordic countries - and the region as a whole was its hub.

Fights, unity and then rethinking

Viewed in a historical perspective, media researchers in the Social Sciences and media researchers in the Humanities kept their distance from one another in terms of theory and methodology for some time. In the Humanities, the focus often rested on the meaning of human expression from the perspective of Linguistics, Philosophy, the Arts and Literature. The social scientists had, 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.

But let us not get the idea that we were all 'one big happy family'. Far from it. In time, conflicts arose, not just squabbles, but serious divides – between scholars in the Humanities and those in the social sciences, between positivism and hermeneutics, between empiricism and theory, between quantitative and qualitative approaches, and also between Left and Right. Probably, it was about theoretical uncertainty within the new media research field in

Sweden, Denmark and Norway against the deeper theoretical knowledge of the Finnish research community, which included both media and journalism studies, and communication studies.

For many years, a 'front line' ran through the Nordic research community, dividing those who applied quantitative methods from those who used qualitative. Ultimately, it was about theoretical uncertainty within the new media research field in Sweden, Denmark and Norway against the deeper theoretical knowledge of the Finnish research community, which included both media and journalism studies, and communication studies. Harsh words rang through our ranks. There were even occasions when words led to push, and push to shove. Passions can run high, even among academics!

Then came the 'cultural turn' in the 1980's. The cultural turn had a strong impact on the development – theoretical, empirical and methodological – of both the Humanities and Social Sciences in all our countries. The 'cultural turn' represented a development that brought researchers in the respective traditions 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. The concept of reception and text became central. It was a process of hybridisation in some regions of the field. The 'cultural turn' had a far stronger impact on media and communication studies than on many other fields.

The conflicts subsided, but our field was diversifying at an accelerating pace, while it was also expanding. The statistical curves for book publication and new journals bulged, new groups of researchers were founded. And, not least, a trend toward increasing specialization 'took off'. Most of the impulses that reached us in this era came from the USA and Great Britain.

So came something of an identity crisis. The question, 'Is Media and Communication Studies really a discipline or just a field of study', once raised, would not go away. It haunted us – for decades.

Discussions about the relevance, the status, even the legitimacy of our work figured increasingly often on our agendas – often phrased in terms of 'rethinking'. Self-critical examinations were carried out, not least in the USA, and they colored both regional and national research conferences in our part of the world. The special issue of *Journal of Communication* in 1993, on "The Future of the Field" was widely read and sent ripples through our waters.

In the Nordic meetings of the 1990s doubts began to be raised as to the wisdom of striving to be an independent discipline. Might it not be leading in the wrong direction, toward isolation from established disciplines? These voices pointed to the major changes taking place in our societies, to the globalization of media, new ICT, democratization processes after the fall of the Wall, and the emergence of more variegated multicultural societies in Europe. There was clearly a need to develop our knowledge, to gain a better understanding of these and other phenomena.

The 'doubters' saw a risk in ever-greater specialization. Media research is, and must be, an interdisciplinary field of study, they argued. The times called for a rapprochement with 'the parent disciplines'. Several researchers pointed to the kind of cul de sac that awaited, unless we developed our theory. Continuing to 'borrow' our science from other disciplines implied a barren future. Then, as now, a good number of media studies were done outside the field of Media and Communication Studies proper, and scholars from other disciplines were invited to Nordic meetings to enrich our understanding of the media and to 'build bridges'.

Probably for a variety of reasons, it was common practice to invite American and British colleagues to our meetings. The Nordic region was a 'player' in international research, and there was a need to exchange views and findings, but it may also have been that Anglo-American 'star quality' helped to legitimize the discipline here at home. Our collective self-confidence needs a boost every now and then, it seems.

Today, nearly all our universities in the Nordic countries have departments of media and communication studies – that is not contested, it is obvious. The graduates produced each year number in the thousands, and a good number of doctoral theses are presented. More than 60 dissertations were approved in the Nordic countries in 2012.

What has media and communication research accomplished?

But, at the same time we have reason to stop and think about what Media and Communication Research has accomplished. It is not easy to 'sum up' the field, but two Nordic researchers have made attempts. The one is Kaarle Nordenstreng, University of Tampere, a pioneer in the field, both nationally and internationally. The other is Espen Ytreberg, Department of Media and Communication Studies, University of Oslo, who has his background in Media and Communication Research.

First, the achievements according to Nordenstreng in a few brief points:

Media and Communication Research has

- contributed to modernization as well as to post-industrial, postmodern society and globalization;
- constructed the hubris of media independence and the Information Society;
- integrated social sciences and the humanities, while delinking them from their roots;
- created interdisciplinary specialities highlighting new phenomena and canonizing them;
- the expanded field became more and more differentiated, with new media and Internet, boosting specialities, which easily gained the status of major subjects and disciplines in the academic nomenclature.

These conclusions relate to both the influence the research has had on how our societies have developed, and its influence on the research area itself. Nordenstreng's starting point is that Media and Communication Research is to be considered a field.

Espen Ytreberg published a book entitled, *Hva er medievitenskap* [What Is Media Studies] in 2008. He takes as his starting point the idea that media researchers have a certain scientific perception or perspective. The idea imbues our praxis vis-à-vis the outside world. Within the field, amongst ourselves, he argues, the situation is different because for many years there has been some resistance to defining ourselves in positive terms. Ytreberg ascribes this resistance to the debate on 'field' versus 'discipline'.

Certain knowledge about media and society is central, he says, and about these 'core' points there has to be some consensus:

- That media form communication – McLuhan's "The medium is the message" – is a basic precept that underlies current perceptions of different phenomena in society and life – 'mediatization' (extending to phenomenological and culture sociological approaches that guide the formulation of questions about inherent characteristics of the media and have both theoretical and analytical dimensions).
- That media form everyday life – Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall – daily life as a focus of the media researcher's perception (in extension reception research).
- That media form the public sphere – Jürgen Habermas – in extension critical research on the involvement of media in the construction of local, national and global public spheres.

The task before media researchers is therefore to convince other researchers that it simply is not possible to comprehend either communication, daily life or the public sphere without an understanding of how the media influence these things.

Ytreberg emphasizes the interdisciplinary character of Media Studies, but he does not ask how well media researchers of today have kept and developed the wealth of knowledge accumulated by colleagues over so many years, knowledge that was gained in interdisciplinary environments like the Chicago school, the Frankfurt school, the Birmingham school, the Toronto school and so forth. The environments in which the 'core points' he speaks of originated. And how do contemporary media researchers go about exploring the interfaces between media/communication, politics, cultural life, philosophy and psychology. Ytreberg, too, has a tendency to ignore the underlying structures.

Looking forward

These days our contemporary global and multicultural societies raise more complex issues than ever before. Digitization, coinciding as it does with increasing commercialization and far-reaching media convergence, is changing our communication systems – in terms of time and space, as well as modes of social behavior, and the structure of both governance and markets with even new types of transnational companies.

This situation means that the research community needs to revive its curiosity in order to explore new phenomena in the society around us. That is a challenge for the media and communication research field.

Now, as 50 years ago, issues of democracy and development are central, and once again, technological advances are a prime driving force. The research area and knowledge production are different nowadays. 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.

But, still the overall objective must be to enable our research field to answer questions about access to and use of media, the role of media and communication with regard to the distribution of power and influence in our societies, in addition to questions relating to media and communication content and the role of media and communication in everyday life and social change.

The core conceptual apparatus established 30 to 40 years ago is somewhat inadequate. A good deal of renovation is called for if we are to comprehend the changes that are taking place.

Concepts are not entities unto themselves; they acquire their meaning from the contexts to which they are applied.

Still concepts like power, hegemony, equality, social justice and identity are of more vital importance than ever, but they have to be seen in a new context. And we need to know more about how the concepts relate to each other. And, I think as several other researchers, that we need a return to historical, disciplinary roots, reinserting media in the social, political, cultural and the economic.

When the issues are as complex as those we face today, holistic perspectives are really important. But, today the media and communication field is broad and characterized by diversity and extensive specialization - the flora of journals reflects this very well.

It is a situation of exceedingly keen competition for research funding. There is a general 'hysteria' concerning rankings among universities. At the individual level there is pressure to publish articles as a measure of productivity, of citations as an indicator of quality.

Specialization that produces studies of high quality is not a problem in itself, but it can be problematic unless accompanied by inquiry on a systems level. There is a risk that a high degree of specialization may lose its fertility for lack of ideas and an inability to formulate new problems of relevance.

The frantic hunt for research funding, increasing pressures to publish in international journals, and far-reaching specialization – on a market that has become increasingly trend-sensitive – are not unrelated. Thought, 'second-thoughts' and reflection are scarce in day-to-day academic life. With what effects for the knowledge development we have to ask?

A question of relevance could be – and it applies to far more fields than media and communication research – if perhaps research has evolved from 'empirical proof and models', via verifiable fact, into narratives and constructions through which researchers, each in his or her own specialized area, are looking to be quoted, each busy sniffing out the latest trend that will bring in funding.

But, no doubt, internationalization is both enriching and necessary in the intercultural and global world of today as it is with regard to our common interest in broader, more all-inclusive paradigms. Quite definitely, we need more collaboration - not least beyond our familiar intellectual habitat. We need to learn more from one another, to share knowledge and contexts.

We are compelled not only to focus more on transnational phenomena in general, but also to note and explore differences - to recognize regional inequalities from a multipolar world perspective. That is a prerequisite for developing innovative and genuinely international agendas – agendas that cross ethnic, cultural, religious and political frontiers – and for helping to improve the quality and utility of knowledge worldwide.

It is important to further develop 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.

When I read through reviews in international quality journals of the titles Nordicom publishes– and there are many such reviews – three things stand out: 1. that the most widely read articles concern new phenomena relating to media culture; 2. that reviewers find democracy perspectives particularly interesting and important; and 3. that 'the Nordic voice' is so often explicitly mentioned in a most positive tone.

Nordic researchers today move about freely in international settings – particularly Anglo-American ones – and publish articles in prestigious international journals. But, they are also – still - attending the NordMedia conference meetings, and they publish articles in Nordicom Review and Nordicoms books.

A regional collaboration that colleagues in other parts of the world envies us. This is something to preserve. The exchange between national, regional and international levels will even in a longer term be of decisive importance, both to the development of the field in the Nordic countries and to our success in the international arena.

We have reason to reflect on many questions – some of them similar to those that were asked at Voksenåsen 40 years ago – about the normative direction for media research and how that relate to other human sciences; and in what context media phenomenon should be studied, and even media research, to whose benefit?

We have to build on past work but break new ground. We need to grasp and absorb new and unexpected insights, and to question our 'givens'. We need to develop analytical frameworks that will guide comparative analysis of media and communication. Without comparative studies we run an obvious risk that certain factors will grow out of proportion. Statistics would play a crucial role in this respect.

It is imperative that media and communication researchers make an effort to exploit the intellectual niche that opens up when the near-sightedness of other established disciplines leads them to neglect the role of media in contemporary society and culture, a neglect which will seriously weaken their further development.

So, it is time to further strengthen our capacity to propose and imagine models that contribute to more holistic paradigms of civilizations – nationally, regionally and internationally. It is all about our accumulated knowledge, our memory, our ability to adopt a critical approach, our creativity and – not least our will. We must, put very simply, dare to

do more – together! The Nordic Region continues to provide a most fruitful platform for that mission – today and tomorrow.