

# Media, Communication and Social Critique

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## Crisis Again?

The importance of mass media is steadily growing – on that we presumably can all agree. But the same can hardly be said of the research that deals with these media – media and mass communication research. (A more controversial proposition, I expect.) Indeed, as I see it, our field is becoming ever more marginal. This may be more the case in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries, I should add.

Our marginalization is dual: in relation to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and, secondly, in relation to contemporary currents of social and cultural critique. Our influence in both cases is negligible, but the reasons may differ. In the former case, one contributing factor may be the institutionalization of the subject as a discipline of its own, with a certain degree of ‘alienation’ from other disciplines as a natural result. As for our lack of influence in public discussion of the media and broader cultural and social issues, the problem may be that we have lost touch with reality, by which I mean a general failure to adjust to such major historical developments as the advances in communication and information technology, transnationalization, and the emergence of a new world (dis)order.

Now, we can approach this complex of problems in terms of how the field relates to other fields of inquiry, or we can treat our field in relation to its object of study, viz., the media, media professionals, and consumers of the media. Obviously, intricate questions are involved; what is more the factors

all dovetail into one another. In the following I shall concentrate on the situation within the field, as I see it from my Swedish horizon. I do so inasmuch as our relative insignificance (relative to the media’s roles in society) also has to do with the internal organization of our field and the figures of thought that it gives rise to.

We clearly show a tendency toward conformity which fully equals the conformity we observe in the media. Frequently, it leads to rigid, barren and often non-manifest polarizations. Perhaps this urge to conformity is some kind of desperate attempt to achieve harmony in a field which has split itself lengthwise and crosswise: social sciences vs. humanities, media and communication vs. journalism research, and so forth. Such taxonomies and the *dualisms* they invite may serve certain purposes in the domestic lives of institutions, but they have contributed to moving our field of inquiry off to the sidelines of both the public arena and academic playing fields.

The institutionalization of our discipline appears to have eroded the interface and interaction between us and our ‘mother disciplines’. There is still some influx of intellectual imports via students, graduate students and teachers who come from other disciplines. The other side of the coin is that neither do we leave many traces in the theoretical and methodological development of kindred disciplines. What is in fact happening is that the media themselves alter the traditional objects of study of these disciplines, sometimes unbeknownst to our colleagues. For example, the media have changed not only the forms by which political

opinion-formation takes place, they have also changed the content of ‘politics’ itself. They have altered the spatial configuration of cultures and subcultures; various new interactive modes of communication have changed the meaning of ‘social interaction’, and they have changed the nature of such fundamental concepts as ‘sources’, ‘documents’ and ‘text’. Despite all this, Media and Communication Research has not made any significant contributions to the theoretical corpus or conceptual apparatus of either Political Science, Anthropology, Sociology or Historiography. In short: the very far-reaching implications of new media have not been matched by any broadening of the scope of our research. Why is this? Do we choose not to deal with, to neglect significant problems simply because we prefer to specialize ourselves to death? All the while the media become ever more integrated into the society around us?

I say we need an open, responsive discipline, but one with a well-defined object of research and a theoretical core (or cores) which is both amenable and able to carry on a fruitful dialogue with other disciplines on a reasonably equal footing. This is to say, a situation in which interdisciplinary inquiry is pursued in collaboration with other disciplines and institutions. But such a situation will hardly come about until the various childhood ills interdisciplinary approaches still suffer within our departments – the rivalries and ‘border skirmishes’, the (mutual) suspicion – have been overcome.

Thus, I see our research horizons and fundamental conceptualizations as being dependent on the ways in which the research field is ordered – its internal taxonomies, its relations vis-à-vis other fields, and so forth. Horizons and conceptual apparatuses can ossify if a field is institutionalized and integrated into overarching academic structures in such a way that external influences – be they from other disciplines or from the outside world – are actively resisted, are simply not accorded priority, or are not allowed to influence the construction of research objects and the questions we ask about them.

‘Multidisciplinary’ institutions do not necessarily go free from such tendencies. There is always a risk that the communication models at hand – formulated as they are in specific historical contexts – cannot adequately describe and interpret events and processes that occur in a later context (post-colonial, post-communist and so forth). John Downing carries on a similar discussion in *Internationalizing Media Theory*, where he tests traditional theories of mass communication on the current situation in Eastern Europe and Russia.

But theories reflect more than their organizational preconditions, by which I mean the prevailing faculty system and its subdivision into the humanities and the social sciences. Despite intellectual resistance in some quarters, historical processes, too, can force themselves upon the academic community. The pressures militating against interdisciplinary approaches, and the enormous difficulties such undertakings inevitably must overcome, attest to this.

This leads us over into the question of the two cultures – the humanities and the social sciences – and the fleet of dualisms which help maintain and legitimize the differentiation. Text and Context is its flagship. This distinction, in turn, provokes an inventory of *counterstrategies* in the form of efforts to bridge over or deny strictly observed dichotomies. It is these counterstrategies which represent our only hope that media and communication research might attain a stature that is more proportionate to the role mediated communication plays in late-modern society.

### One Academic Field?

It is only natural that institutional structures will greatly influence the breadth and depth of our intellectual horizons and how we formulate questions for research. We might start, for example, with the way our leading journals construe the world, as reflected in their titles: In Europe we have *Media, Culture & Society, Theory, Culture & Society, Discourse & Society (Theory & Society, Time & Society...)*. Ever this ubiquitous “&”! One exception (there are others, of course) is *European Journal of Communication*. In the USA we have *Journal of Communication, Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly, Journal of Communication Inquiry, Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, and so on. The European examples suggest a preoccupation with contexts – which have been neatly shepherded into the word “Society”. Nordic journals, for their part, have names like *Mediekultur* (Denmark: ≈ Media Culture), *Tiedotustutkimus* (Finland: ≈ Communication Research) and *Norsk medietidsskrift* (Norway: ≈ Norwegian Journal of the Media). Sweden isn’t on the charts, for we have no journal of our own, unless you count *Makt & Media* (≈ Power & the Media), a commercial, journalistic product.

If we consult the journals’ statements of policy, or their de facto content, we seldom find any balance between the attention devoted to the phenomenon, ‘society’ or the concept, ‘context’, and what-

ever the other term may be, in terms of theory. Not in the respective articles or in the journals taken as a whole. Still, the “&” is an editorial signal. But what does it mean? Why this difference, if not between European and American research culture, then between our journals’ manner of defining the field of research? The “and” must mean something. After all, there are no journals called “Media or Society”, “Journalism or Culture”, etc., inviting one to feel free to write about the one or the other.

I should like to take a few moments and probe into this “and” and why is it there, what it does, the research strategies it symbolizes or excludes, and conceivable alternative strategies.

We might, of course, simply delete the “and” (replacing it, for example, with a “/”, as in Foucault’s “power/knowledge”); or we might add more “ands”, thereby dissolving the dichotomy (perhaps creating several more); we might replace it with “both ... and...” or “and/or” – each of which represents a fundamental epistemological stand within the field. Most more or less contemporary ‘-isms’ and ‘-ists’ are definable in terms of strategies like these. The “and” and its various stand-ins define the field: media and society, language and society, power and the media, and so forth. It is an “and” which both conjoins and separates, thereby producing a problem, perhaps as futile as the mind-body dualism.

Another common variety are the “as”-theses: language as society, society as language, and similar such propositions of identity. Then, we have the “in”-model, which suggests a logic of inclusion or envelopment: the media in society, journalism in the welfare society, communication in organizations, etc. “And”, “or” and “in” are little words, which nevertheless say quite a lot about how we choose to construct our research objects.

Why is it that we communication researchers are so concerned with – at times totally preoccupied with – ‘text and context’ and similar distinctions? It may well have to do with the fact that we have imported the academic faculty structure – primarily the humanities and the social sciences – and placed it in the heart of our ‘discipline’, our field of interest. Some Nordic departments of communication research sort under the one faculty, others under the other; in some cases different parts of a given department sort under different faculties, in yet other cases the subject is housed within another discipline, in which case it may not have departmental status. The organizational arrangements may, in response to the vagaries of the *Zeitgeist*, privilege either Text or Context.

Any strategy for handling the problematics of text/context is at once a strategy vis-à-vis the structural – ultimately political – conditions which generated (and continue to generate) such deceptive (over-)simplifications. We fall all too easily into the sorts of *reductionisms* John B. Thompson (among others) discusses: textualism vs. sociology, i.e., the fallacies of “internalism” and “externalism”, respectively. The dichotomy leads to the systematic elimination of any perspective which implies a rejection of the dualism. In other words, “text and context” actually means “text or context”. It is a question of two distinct cultures, whose potential for productive coexistence in one and the same field has been strongly overestimated.

Now, then. I have intentionally dramatized this wail of woe in order to provide an antidote to all the starry-eyed rhetoric we hear concerning collaboration between disciplines. In Sweden, in any case, interdisciplinary research is all too commonly looked upon as a matter of bureaucratic coordination (having no impact on what is to be coordinated) rather than an intellectual adventure, the results of which cannot be foreseen.

## Two Cultures?

We always speak from a given point in time and space, and I should say a few words about the material structure which constitutes the point of departure for the metatheoretical reflections which follow. It is an environment in which I personally have been relatively privileged in terms of funding and so forth, so my comments are not a case of ‘sour grapes’, should such a suspicion arise. But it is a setting which has afforded a number of insights – for better or worse – concerning the veritable chasm which can open up and separate the humanities from the social sciences, a chasm which, in my experience, is widely underestimated. My description is drastic, just as reality sometimes is.

At Stockholm University the Department of Journalism, Media and Communication, known to most as ‘JMK’, was created through the fusion of the School of Journalism (which initially did not belong to any faculty, since the training was offered outside the university system), Information Studies (a main subject) and the Centre for Mass Communication Research. More or less by chance, the infant JMK was placed among the humanities, which implied some interesting practical consequences for its members. Suddenly, the social scientists among us had to submit their applications for postgraduate faculty grants, their syllabi and so forth to a com-

mittee of linguists and historians, etc. For the social scientists, this new collaboration with philologists and students of literature was a real learning experience.

But now clouds mounted on the horizon, as well. All the old, familiar problems of 'interdisciplinarity' and some more exotic ones, too. This was not just any handful of disciplines, but groupings who for a century or more had never ventured across the no-man's-land which separates two epistemological, theoretical, methodological, etc., etc., worlds. Two separate cultures whose very day-to-day routines differ – due to fundamentally different conceptions of what research is to begin with. The difference is apparent in such trivial details as how we cite our sources, how we formulate our research questions and much, much more. We often understand terms like 'theory', 'method', 'empirical', etc., differently. What may simply be bad or good 'sources' (of something else) to some of us are to others fascinating examples of discursive practices.

Such a structure creates all kinds of problems for administrative bodies, as well. Take, for example, the obligatory ranking of doctoral candidates whose merits differ in the extreme: some, to whom writing is a matter of reporting findings, and others, for whom writing itself constitutes a vital part of the research process. The one group may underestimate, the other exaggerate writing as an act of scientific creation.

In support of my contention that it truly is a question of an intellectual divide, let me submit some pairs of opposites having to do with "text/context". The challenge, of course, lies in finding a way to transcend the pairs, against the grain of all the rigid structures. Communication research should be pragmatic, i.e., tackle complex, social phenomena of a global nature, yet we carry on about distinctions like the *individual* versus *society*, *action* versus *structure*, *micro* as opposed to *macro*, *consciousness* as opposed to *media*, or *psychology* as opposed to *technique*, *abstract* not *concrete*. We operate in a *symbolic* universe or a *material* one; it is a choice between *information* or *force*, *diffusion* or *relation*; we address *consumption* or the *production* sphere, *culture* or *economics*.

Whenever one term is privileged to the exclusion of the other term and all it represents, cultural research is reduced to a pure *science of the spirit* (*Geisteswissenschaft*), and social research to a kind of systems analysis, to *social mechanics*. The narratives generated in these limited and limiting positions are about the world as an office or an

amusement park, as a factory or a battlefield. That is to say, they represent (a certain kind of) *humaniora* in contradistinction from (a certain kind of) *social science*. They are grand narratives which privilege one or another aspect of a dualistic universe.

The figure on the next page shows a schematic map of 'the prison-yard of dichotomies'. In it, the segregating mechanisms of our science become visible. These mechanisms represent two different kinds of incarceration: First, the penchant for dualistic thinking as such. The other is the kind of reductionism which, in its most extreme form, denies the validity of 'the other side', thereby legitimizing epistemological bigotry, with varying degrees of sophistication

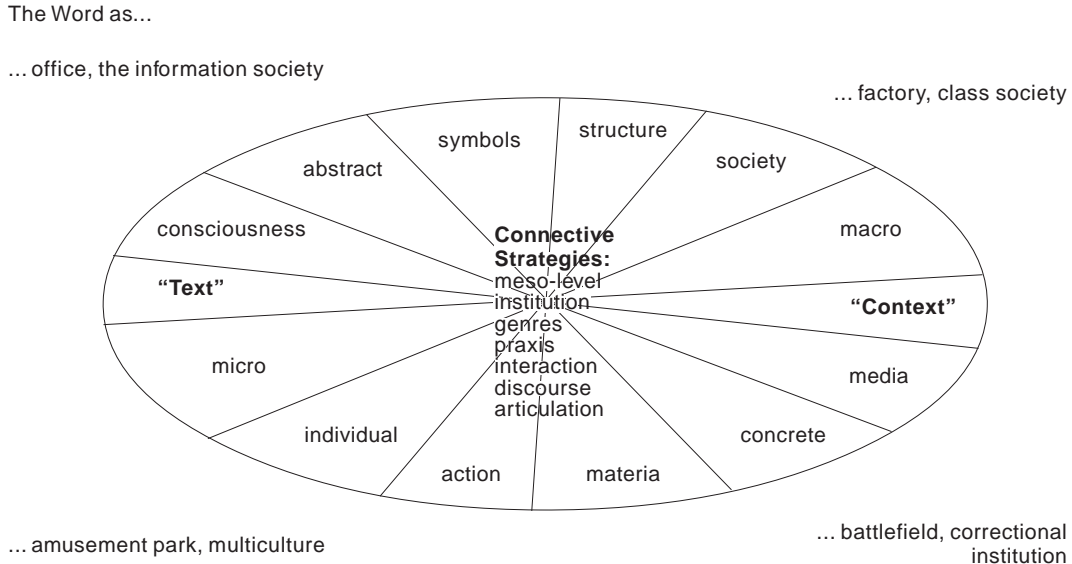
Lifeworld – systemworld, private sphere – public sphere, culture – nature ... To name but a few, but neither do I mean to be taxonomic, only to establish a starting point for a provisional analysis of empirical strategies in media and communication research. The diagram gives an indication of where the boundaries run and why, and of the institutional basis of intellectual structures. Given such a map or 'layout' we clearly see how some problematics are sanctioned, and others dismissed as 'unscientific' and/or uninteresting. In practice, the structure militates against all manner of interdisciplinary inquiry and theoretical integration.

The ambition to transcend or resolve one or another dualism is present in the many attempts to define 'third levels' or some other bridging device – an assortment of terms such as 'meso-level', 'institution', 'genre', 'praxis', 'articulation' and 'relationalism'. In some cases 'discourse' – in the sense of 'discursive practice' or the 'articulation' of discursive and non-discursive phenomena – is used this way. Otherwise, of course, 'discourse' is a strictly textual phenomenon. Post-structuralism encompasses a broad array of positions.

One of the more widely known trichotomizations in this area is Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative acts, in which he, with the help of Popper's three world-theory, tries to understand communication as action which takes place in and between the subjective, social and objective worlds. Unfortunately, Habermas does not relate this micro-level conceptualization to his earlier theory of the public sphere, let alone to the realities of modern-day media systems and the new patterns of interaction these give rise to on both lesser and grander scales. He leaves a lot of work to be done here – as many before me have pointed out.

The distinction between micro and macro is very illustrative in that it allows any number of in-

Figure 1. The Prison-Yard of the Dichotomies and Corresponding Metaphors



terpretations, each representing a strategy, e.g., ‘neutralizing’ a dichotomy by turning it into a trichotomy: wedging a third meso-level in between the micro- and macro-levels. Here we are operating in a one-dimensional world, where everything can be assigned to its proper level. This third ‘level’ is assumed to negotiate a link between the other two, sometimes without these even having been specified.

Real interdisciplinary science, however, requires more than simple addition, and so we need to entertain ideas of kinds that for some reason have yet to gain acceptance in the academic pigeon-holing apparatus. They may, in fact, seriously question it.

**Other Strategies**

In his *The Invention of Communication* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998:8) Armand Mattelart offers some reasons why the debates concerning current developments in the media sector have been so banal, caught up, as they are, in dualistic visions and hopeless dilemmas where one is forced to choose between, say, free will and social determinism, between local and global perspectives, between individual and collective, between abstraction and experience, between culture and nature. This shows without a doubt, Mattelart writes, a sad lack inability to discover

subtle links and to see the various levels as dimensions of phenomena that, in the end, are all parts of a greater whole.

Mattelart does not discuss the historical, Cartesian roots to these rigid dualisms or the purposes they serve in present-day Academia. Nor does he point out their diversity. Taking a realistic, sociological view, Pierre Bourdieu, however, observes that the dualisms serve as instruments of social censorship, legitimizing the bounds of competency and blocking whatever insights might occur concerning relationships between artificially separated fields of action (cf. Bourdieu & Loïc, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

Many advocate an action-oriented, pragmatic, dialectically synthesis-creating and constructivist approach, albeit they operate with quite diverse concepts. Some authors are especially interesting for their refusal to grant ontological priority to either side in an thoroughly dualistic world. Some are monists like Bourdieu (reality is one and indivisible); others have chosen other strategies. We have, for example, Michail Bachtin, convinced of the essential unity of language and social formations, (loosely) relates genres to historical *social orders*. There are Michel Foucault’s studies of *discourses* and *institutional contexts*, of power and knowledge, of the ultimate dovetailing of discursive and non-discursive realities. Again, Jürgen

Habermas and his building blocks, communication *acts* and *Öffentlichkeit-structures, systems* and *lifeworld* and, finally, Anthony Giddens' *action* and *structure* – a conception prefigured by Bourdieu and his habitus and field.

Even though none of them has treated actual conditions and modes of communication in the late-modern era, all these writers have been in vogue at one time or another. This bears witness to the magnetism of their perspectives. Perhaps we shall see more cross-fertilization with a less rigid field of media and communication studies.

### **The Social Centre of the Media**

And so, I have arrived at an answer to the question posed to this panel before the conference: What is the status of theory and methodological development in the field in terms of text and context? The short answer is that the distinction, 'text and context', is theoretically uninteresting, but that is not to say it serves no purpose. Indeed, it, like other dualisms, does its part to maintain a social and intellectual structure which actually blocks the further development of both theory and method in the field. The 'and' in such dualisms legitimizes dichotomy, encourages false level-metaphors, and directs our attention to posited relationships between (often) incommensurable entities.

Media and communication studies could be an autonomous discipline in the no-man's-land between the humanities and the social sciences, a venue where 'texts' and 'contexts' meet – not as perpetual battle-cries, but as equally elaborated theoretical domains. Thus we might avoid both internalism and externalism. Such theoretical integration would enable us to make significant contributions to other disciplines. It would enable us to avoid reducing ourselves to merely one of the many 'hyphenated sociologies' or, alternatively, to no more than an application of existing theories of literature or language to less status- and prestige-conferring areas which have yet to gain acceptance as objects of research in more venerable disciplines. Only in

this way can media and communication research hope to fill the gap which the social sciences and the humanities have created between themselves.

It might also give us an intellectual platform for a media critique which also functions as *social* and *cultural critique*. Above all, theoretical integration is necessary for interdisciplinary inquiry to be able to follow the metamorphoses in 'texts', 'media', 'politics', 'the economy', and 'culture', which are constantly losing old and gaining new meanings. More real-world problems are media-related than ever before: they have to do with post-communism and globalization, urban public spheres, cultural identities and new class structures, nationality and nationalism.... Often, the very presence of mass media and the extant opportunities for, and barriers to communication are part of the problem.

The marginalization of media and communication research within the scientific community is largely due to the marginalization of synthesizing strategies within the field itself. Synthesis is needed to heighten interest in our work and to increase its relevance to the broader and deeper currents of intellectual discourse in this age of sudden and profound changes. The situation calls for a transnationalization (not just internationalization) of communication research, which has remained surprisingly parochial and bound to the nation-state.

There are any number of theoretically transcendental problems for research. Here I can mention but a few: sociological genre theories and text analysis, ideological critique based on conversation analysis, techno-systems and structures of consciousness, social change and communicative acts, aesthetics and the public sphere, modes of reflexivity and modernization, mediated class discourses of post-communism, the conditions of production in the information society and its techno-culture, the political economy and self-legitimizing strategies of journalism, the industrial mediation of emotions, global/local fictions, the culture of contemporaneity.... There is much to be done on the way toward an historical and comparative cultural-sociological theory of action relating to media communication.