

# Foreword

What is the role of media in society? This was the initial question when Scandinavian media research was conceived during the 1970s. The answers differed according to national contexts. However, in Sweden and Norway, questions and answers were articulated in fairly similar ways. Media research developed along parallel lines in these two countries in the early days. Both traditions were based on a social science perspective with roots in the political sciences.

After all these years we have seen development and fragmentation – as well as change – in both media research and in the research field itself. While the different media – as for example books, press, radio, film and television – originally were separated into different social institutions, digitization of production and distribution has radically changed the area of communication. The resulting convergence of the means of communication is not only technical; the Internet forms new markets and challenges nationally established structures and practices in ways which were unthinkable only a few years ago. The means of communication have become global in their distribution and use in ways which format both communication and research.

The early political science perspective in Sweden and Norway was based on research on structural aspects of the media. The “cultural turn”, with a focus on “texts” as well as reception of the media, resulted in an expansion – but also a fragmentation – of the research field. As a consequence, the overall question about the role of the media in society can now be raised from other perspectives than before. However, new perspectives and new media have also resulted in a fragmentation of the field which produces many different answers to this overall question. Moreover, another consequence of fragmentation is that relevant questions at an overall level might be neglected, for example when it comes to “marketization” of the media as well as of the research itself. Is media research playing the critical and overall role it should ideally play?

New media structures raise new challenges in asking about the role of the media in society. Accordingly, phenomena like Google and You Tube are not only challenging established national media structures, they are also challenging media research. With media expansion, the need for analyses and research on the social role of the media is more pressing than ever.

In 2006, two pioneering representatives of the early media research tradition turned 60 years old; Lennart Weibull of the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, and Helge Østbye of the University of Bergen, Norway. Both grew up in the aftermath of the Second World War; both were children of the new education society and first in the ranks when higher education exploded; both saw the electronic mass media expand; and both became founders of the new discipline known as “mass communication research” at their respective universi-

ties. Lennart's and Helge's entry to this field was political science. Hence, the corresponding development of Swedish and Norwegian mass communication research is reflected in the analogies between Lennart and Helge. They were both pioneers in the establishment of media departments during the second half of the 1980s; Lennart of the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication in Gothenburg, Helge of the Department of Mass Communication at the University of Bergen.

As institutional entrepreneurs, they have had a significant impact on later generations of media researchers at their respective universities. Both have assumed great responsibilities in the recruitment of students as well as new colleagues. And both have headed their respective institutions through several periods. The responsibility behind this institutional entrepreneurship has been manifested through a great will to contribute textbooks to the field. Their own research efforts have concentrated on media politics, media structures, media economy and media activities in general. An explicit interest in journalism and journalism studies has furthermore resulted in comprehensive research in this field.

As early entrepreneurs they were central in establishing national and Nordic research infrastructure on the field: From 1973 the bi-annual Nordic research conferences and the Nordicom centre for documentation and publication, where they have both acted as chair members. They have also both been heavily involved in European comparative research.

Then to the initial question of the role of mass media in society. This special issue of *Nordicom Review* intends to raise that overall questions to well established and new forms of media. It is edited to congratulate Lennart Weibull and Helge Østbye, and to appreciate their contributions to the research field. As editors we hope that the contributions will stimulate further Nordic research co-operation, and also stimulate the area of research, both in national and international contexts.

Let us conclude by thanking all the contributors who have made this issue of *Nordicom Review* possible. Thanks also to the departments of media studies at the universities in Bergen and Göteborg, and to the Norwegian Media Authority, who have given their financial support to the book.

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