

# Challenges of the New Symbolic Order

*The 17th Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research*

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Good afternoon. On behalf of SMID, the Danish Association of Media Researchers, I'd like to welcome you all to Aalborg University. The occasion is pleasant. The conference of media researchers from the Nordic countries has become a meeting place we would have to invent, if we didn't have it. Generally, media research in our countries is carried out on a high level. Media research as well as the societies and cultures it refers to have a lot in common. But it also implies a sufficient number of striking and eye opening dissimilarities. This is why comparison between the Nordic countries is always an inspiring undertaking.

The list of participants displays a lot of veterans – and quite a few newcomers. Welcome to both categories. Fortunately, it is not so simple, that the vets only serve the noble purpose of continuity and the newcomers the purpose of renewal. If I can rely on the clues in the abstracts, tradition and innovation are mixed among the participants and cross the generations.

What a summer! Suicide bombers in London in July, reminding us of Madrid last year in March. Thanks to surveillance cameras, the bombers didn't remain anonymous, but the first team remained dead – just as the team in Madrid killed themselves before they were arrested. An efficient way of stopping dialogue. Unwilling to state their aim, reluctant to claim any kind of responsibility for their actions, death becomes the only message. This message was repeated in Sharm-el-Sheik. And indeed in Musayyib, Iraq. Only, the last mentioned attack didn't receive much attention in the media. What's new? This suicide bombing resembled so many others in Iraq, only it was worse.

Following the line from 9/11, action has replaced reasoning, violence has substituted arguments. Suddenly, we are forced to acknowledge that the days when hi-jacking and threats were accompanied by messages in words are over. Words are not met with appreciation by these groups. How very odd! However savage and inexcusable the actions of the Baader-Meinhof-group were during the 1970es, they were easier to understand than this language of sudden violence in the tube, a railway station, a holiday resort or a market place. The message, of course, is clear – even if it is not expressed in words: the war in Afghanistan or Iraq will spread to the rest of the world. Destruction, consequently, will be conducted anywhere. Don't feel safe – ever! The new symbolic order of sudden death-bringing action is both cruel and real.

In this situation, it is a challenge to keep up circumstantial, scientific analysis – of the news, of the images and representations of events, the rhetoric, the victims, of the criminals and their possible motives, backgrounds and contexts. This challenge has been met

by participants of the conference, e.g. in research on ‘War and consequence’ (in connection with the war in Iraq), ‘the Politics of fear’, ‘Reporting the Crusade’ and the representation of ethnical otherness in the media.

Does this mean that priority should be given to analysis of facts? Of course not. Shortly, even the events of 9/11 will be represented on film. It will be split up in hundreds of dramas, and it will influence people’s perception of 9/11 and its context worldwide. Negotiations will be carried out, introducing various perspectives and alternative interpretations.

Besides, everyday life continues as it always did, and so do all the genres connected to it – from *Extreme Makeover* to *Changing Rooms*, *The Weakest Link* and all sorts of drama and reality shows conveyed on television, discussed in everyday conversation and a major source of comments in the printed media. Such genres even seem to thrive. What does this express about the popular culture and the divides in our societies? Which limits between public and private life are still to be respected? The ethical questions arising from all sorts of reality programmes are evident.

Another recent object of research is the experience economy, a much hyped phenomenon that may have positive effects on the economy of the humanities. To know more about the consequences, we direct our attention to this phenomenon. Obviously, this demands an interdisciplinary approach.

This leads me to a few comments on the theoretical context of this conference and its connections to the last conference. According to Arild Fetweit, one of the key concepts behind the conference programme in Kristiansand two years ago aimed at ‘rectifying’ some of the ‘in-balances’ between scholars from the humanities and the sociologists. This ambition, one could argue, had already begun in Reykjavik. In the reflections on both media history and the media of the future, a combination of research traditions played a dominant part. The Kristiansand conference however, succeeded in drawing more attention to research areas essential to the humanities such as rhetorics in media studies, the globalisation of language, and the questions of digital aesthetics.

This left the planning committee in Aalborg with a problem. Which challenges should we build into the conference programme? On one hand, we wanted to continue what had begun in Kristiansand. On the other hand, we would also like to contribute to the further development of common critical reflection. The result was the theme *Media Research – Demarcations and Interfaces*. We have often disagreed on the relevance of themes, theories and methods. We have even disagreed on the subject whether such a thing as *media research* existed, whether it contained a common kernel, or whether the concept of media research just should be understood as an umbrella! Instead of focusing on the disagreements, we invite you to discuss all the options inherent in the concepts of demarcations and interfaces.

The programme aims at highlighting some of these demarcations and interfaces, such as the role of information in contemporary society, questions of method in constructing the digital object, design as an approach to media research, the impact of sound and silence in the media, the new conditions of public service and TV entertainment – and the reality of media research.

We have provided a frame. It is up to you to fill it in. You are the conference.