Media and Politics

Research Strategies in a Crossdisciplinary Field

Tore Slaatta

As we enter the new millenium, the media research communities in the Nordic countries can look back on the first decades of attempts to bridge the gap between the social sciences and the humanities within the media field. A process of integration and cooperation has been started between scientists in the Nordic universities, and the emergence of a crossdisciplinary field has been reported to be successfully on its way in some departments and less so in others (eg. Weibull in Carlsson and Lindblad 1992).

It could be said to be already accomplished, at least if the prime indication of crossdisciplinarity was that of peaceful coexistence between researchers from different disciplines and fields under the same roof. For instance in Norway, initiatives were taken both in Oslo and Bergen in the mid 80s to gather researchers from the social sciences and from the humanities in one media and communication department (Slaatta and Sæbø 1997). Crossdisciplinarity was intellectually perceived as important, but was first of all an organisational invention: co-existence was thought to be an indispensable necessity for the advancement of an independent field. Through the integration of staff and the development of curriculum and courses which reflected the twin roots of the media problematics, crossdisciplinarity was first of all offered as a discipline to students, fostering a somewhat fragile intellectual identity within the academic field.

It is more problematic to assess the degree of accomplishment or success, if crossdisciplinarity also means increasing the common experience in conducting crossdisciplinary research, involving

The Norwegian Research Project on Power and Democracy, Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, P.O. Box 1093 Blindern, NO-0317 Oslo, tore.slaatta@media.uio.no

systematic co-ordination of research interests, cooperation in collection and analysis of data, and development of overarching, methodologies and epistemological bases for inquiry. I will argue, that after a decade or two of co-existence, the situation is both different and yet very much the same. Crossdisciplinarity is a continuing process and struggle and even has some problems of is own: criticism is often heard that media studies is not an academic field in its own right, because it borrows its theoretical models, concepts and methodologies from other disciplines and has no core identity of its own. And instead of concentrating on developing a solid foundation in social theory, the media field is seen as too eagerly connecting itself to the interests of the media industry and the media professions (Slaatta 1999a, see also Corner 1998 on vocationalism in British media studies).

Yet, there is undoubtedly a stronger sense of a crossdisciplinary identity, which repeatedly is institutionalised and inscribed in curriculum plans, research applications and staff recruitment strategies, and reflected in the professional identity of a growing number of media graduates and postgraduates. However, there still seems to be a lack of a common understanding of how this predominantly institutionally framed crossdisciplinarity should be translated into research strategies. I will argue here that the importance and need for studying media and mass communication as a crossdisciplinary enterprise is strengthened by profound changes, and that our ways of organising and actually doing media research must be critically examined. And I will do this, with regard to a particular domain of the media field: that of the media and politics.

To structure the discussion, I will distinguish between four levels of analysis or components of a research strategy. First, there is the object of analysis, or the empirical focus of research that must be

defined, then there are the methods used to collect and analyse data, then the methodology and the research design, explicating the analytical connections between the empirical data and the theoretical statements, and finally, there is the epistemological level, which lays out the meta-theoretical framework of analysis (see also Bruhn Jensen and Jankowski 1991). The levels are not separate, but serve the purpose of structuring the discussion on the crossdisciplinary challenge to research on media and politics. I will here mostly discuss the first level, concerning the new research imperatives stemming from changes in the objects of analysis: that of the media itself. However, towards the end I will enter a more complex discussion on how epistemological perspectives must be brought into considerations on crossdisciplinary research strategies in the media field.

The New Research Imperatives

Present imperatives for media researchers to undertake crossdisciplinary research are partly caused by significant changes in the object of analysis: that of media and politics itself. I will discuss four separate but interrelated problematics, which are accentuating new, as well as repeating old, challenges and imperatives to theory development and crossdisciplinary research in the media field: globalisation, convergence, the changing political economy of the media industry, and the changing relationships between politics and popular culture.

Globalisation

First, the unavoidable phenomenon of globalisation is an obviously important, although ambiguous term in relation to the media field. In times of any large scale political and social change, the media should be seen as an effective and rewarding entry point for empirical research, as well as a promising point of departure for generating theories for analysing the social and political changes in a multiperspective way. Globalisation makes no exception to this rule.

Looking back, we might be proud to observe, that researchers in the media field were early aware of the importance of communication and media to international studies (Slaatta 1999b). For instance, due to the war experiences, media research was turned towards research on the role of propaganda and persuasion in relation to war and military campaigns (for an overview, see Schramm 1998). Other pioneering studies on international

communication and news were particularly interested in analysing potential bias in foreign news as a threat to rational foreign policy formation, in contrast to what was perceived as more objective, domestic news (e.g. Cohen 1963, Serfaty 1991). However, during the early cold war years, media research became increasingly occupied with analysing the role of the national media and the communication problems within nation states, as the paradigmatic model of society. As Armand Mattelart observes, mass communication research in this period was seen as a means to improve social engineering in the scientific, rational progress of the welfare state (Mattelart 1994). Media research again became preoccupied with the international and the global context of media and communication in the mid 60s, mostly due to the role of the UNESCO research programs and the NWICO debates in the 70s. Here, a normative, third world perspective was opposed to free market models of international information flows (e.g. Righter 1978, Carlsson 1998). However, this critical line of international media research faded and was again substituted with a national and local focus (Braman and Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996). According to Mattelard again, this happened partly as a reaction towards the reductive theories on ideology and culture in imperialist theories, and partly as a result of a new preoccupation with the state and its role in maintaining status quo in times of strong social and political turmoil. In addition, I believe that the specialisation of the media field and its institutional separation from parental fields into departmental domains of teaching and research, in this period moved media researchers away from the academic centres where more crossdisciplinary research agendas continued to be worked out (for similar arguments see also van Dijk 1988 and Corner 1998).

As Sreberny-Mohammadi observes, the terminology of the global and globalisation quickly became the new buzzwords of the 1990s, and with them, as she puts it, "...social theory was finally awoken to the theoretical challenges posed by the real-world dynamics of globalisation" (Braman and Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996: 1). However, although the recent proliferation of research and theories on globalisation shows that mainstream social science again is struggling to reintegrate media and communication perspectives in their models and theories, it can be argued that there still is two separate fields, offering different emphasis on the role of the media in present analyses of the global order (Schlesinger 1991a and 1999). The media and communication field plays a marginal role in the

dominant literature on globalisation, as it has done in mainstream sociology and political science since the early '60s (Mattelart 1994, Schlesinger 1995: 7).

Globalisation processes imply a focus on large scale social and political change, which challenge the capabilities of researchers to develop theories and research strategies that effectively combine micro and macro levels of inquiry. In the media field, researchers must pose questions regarding the democratic role of media along a global/local axis, rather than at the paradigmatic national level. This transition immediately connects the discussion on democracy to the notion of collective identity as a major focus for crossdiciplinary media research (Slaatta 1995).

At the international level, the UNESCO and NWICO research tradition is presently having a timely renaissance, mainly going in two directions: that of studying the increasing globalisation of audio-visual broadcasting (e.g. Boyd-Barret and Thussu 1992, Skovman and Schrøder 1992, Hjarvard 1995, Bruhn Jensen 1998), and that of studying the political economy of the increasingly global media industry, particularly focusing on the structured distributions and flows of international news and film (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1996, Boyd Barret and Rantanen 1998). So far, we should be a bit critical to celebrate the coming of the global as well as to what comes in its wake. For instance, at a global level, it is still important to analyse how the ideological dominans of the West is maintained and reproduced in the global media order. At a local level, an equally important way into these problematics is to take the point of view of minority media, or as Daniel Dayan defines them, of the particularistic media and diasporic communications (Dayan 1998). For instance, the way news discourse is produced and mediated in the newspapers, local radio stations and organisational network media of ethnic minorities and diaspora communities in urban spaces is a germane focus for research on the emergence and transformation of multicultural societies. Different local or particularistic media reproduce and redefine the identities and communicative spaces of what Dayan describes as "...already established, but somehow fragile or imperilled communities" (Dayan 1998: 103). I believe that the present lack of this kind of research is regrettable, and it serves to prove how easy it is for media researchers to become preoccupied with the dominant media and the dominant culture, that they themselves share, and thus reproduce the imbalanced representation of multiculturality as a

misrecognised – and therefor recognised, form of symbolic power.

Convergence and New Media Technology

The next nexus of problematics that I will mention, is related to the present discussions about *convergence* and new information and communication technology. Convergence is the concept used to describe the phenomenon that all forms of communications – written text, statistical data, still and moving images, music and the human voice – now can be coded, stored and relayed in digital form, and made accessible and convertible through the end-user technology of the computer and/or television screen (Golding and Murdoch 1996). The concept of convergence is connected to the more cross-disciplinary concept of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within the social and human sciences.

Changes in media and communications technology, are simultaneously changes in the structuration of the social and cultural spaces for social interaction and integration. Again, this is not a new discussion in the media field, where theories of how media technology structure the social and political space has existed at least since the days of Mc Luhans writings in the early 60s. Referring mostly to the technology of television broadcasting and film, the idea that the electronic media radically imploded the world into one locale, the global village, was – and probably still is – a prophetic idea (McLuhan 1962).

Much theory which emphasis media technology as an explananda for social and political change has concentrated on the concept of identity. In Benedict Anderson's cultural anthropological view, nationalism was seen as a cultural artifact created by the new technological possibilities of print media to imagine community across time and space. This produced a conception of simultaneity and an idea of 'society', moving calendrically through 'homogenous, empty time' (Anderson 1983). Echoing several of McLuhan's earlier insights on the collective, ritual form and cultural effects of script and print media, Anderson argued that the new media technology created time-spatial zones for the representation and distribution of collective memories and imageries. However, the capability of a nation to imagine itself as a community was also dependent on the vernacularisation of national languages, establishing themselves as 'languages-of-power' (Anderson 1983: 42). But it was according to Anderson, print capitalism that provided these lan-

guages both with their media technology and with their audiences. Thus it was through the novel, which Anderson saw as a paradigm for the modern narrative of society, and the newspaper, which he defined as 'an extreme form of the book' and a 'one day best-seller', that the imagined communities and their narratives were 're-presented' (Anderson 1983: 25).

Mostly in accordance with McLuhans and Benedict Anderson's theories, scholars from different fields, like for instance Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), Anthony Giddens (1990), David Held (1995) and John Thompson (1995) all argue that the modern communication systems of broadcast media and film are changing the relevance of geopolitical boundaries, and opening up a possibility for new social and cultural experiences among individuals and groups. Although traditional national cultures and identities are seen as deeply rooted in ethnohistories, David Held argues that "...the growth of global communications, above all of television, video and film, gives people new ways of 'seeing and participating' in global developments." In principle he argues that this opens up the possibility of new mechanisms of identification "at a global or even a local level" (Held 1995: 124).

However, this careful, yet dramatic view is argued on the basis of what I will call the old, rather than the really new media. With the coming of the Internet and the convergence technology, the traditional link between the cultural and the political space for social organisation within the nation state, and the organisational logic of the media and communication industry, is once more disconnected. This time potentially into an almost anarchic disorder. The audio-visual television screen, in its commodified, household form is presently turned into a veritable battle field, or perhaps I should say a battle screen, where a formidable race is taking place between competing formats of software, operative systems, processors, sockets, hardware, cables and networks. In these areas, I believe that changes are coming so fast that researchers, are at most able to follow the industrial agents and the new media professions at distance, and with a considerate time and knowledge gap in their favour. In order to attempt to close the gaps, we must make some professional guessing concerning what will happen in the future.

For instance, with convergence, the present structure of the media industry will become increasingly blurred, as the boundaries between media technologies and their respective audience markets will collapse. Thus, the political economy of the media industry is presently going through a period of enormous change. Convergence will also more fundamentally loosen the ties between the media public sphere and the national system. The leveling of both sources and source documents will empower the receiver's power to choose. Thus, instead of being dependent on the interpretations and comments from journalists and pundits, viewers and readers will be able to follow their special interests directly to source documents and source events. As a possible result, the whole business of journalist media – in their present form, who are used to thrive on exclusive or privileged access to powerful sources, will have an increasingly fragile legitimacy to comment and interpret events, knowledge and signs to their respective audience markets. However, as the appeal to the nation might loose its advantage for some media, it might also be taken up by others, for instance as part of a promotional strategy.

Convergence have a potential to end the traditional one-way linearity of mass communication. The new technology turns the *receiver* into a potential *producer* and radically increases the possibilities of participation of individuals and organisations in the production of media contents. Whatever his or her capabilities to actually produce and mediate information and signs into the web, their power to construct intertextual links and new hierarchies of accessible information becomes almost unlimited. However, already powerful source organisations, bureaucracies, media organisations and media owners will at the same time gain in power to control source access and media use. Thus there is presently an important on-going struggle to keep the new media open and committed to public interests, rather than the purely private interests of the media industry and financial investors in the Internet economy.

There is a strong potential in ICT to increase the speed of politics, and to split the traditional communicative space of the national mass media, into fragmented, specialised spheres of publics. And if the new media technology destroys the existing public spaces for democratic communication without offering something better in return, one could easily foresee increasing gaps and new structural relationships between political elites and electorates, between industrial agents and consumers, and between cultural manufacturers and perceptions of self and community. On the other hand, through specialisation and strengthening of interorganisational communication and representational links within particularistic networks and civic associa-

tions, it also becomes possible to foresee increasing citizens participation and flows of information, challenging the structured division of labour in professional, parliamentary politics. Convergence and ICT more than anything reactualise the concept of power and power relations in the media field (Everard 2000, Webster 1995).

And with it, the crossdisciplinarity of the media field enters from the inside, through the dissolution of its paradigm object of analysis. The media field is challenged at its foundations: as the proper object of analysis, that of the media, is dissolved. In contrast to the traditional media history, which could specialise in histories of the book, the press and of the broadcast media as particular cultural, and national institutions, the new technology makes the national media organisations less important. Media research is now confronted with fundamental questions on how shifts in technological infrastructure within the parameters of a globalised communication economy are disconnecting the political, economic and cultural spaces in the global order (Schlesinger 1995, Slaatta 1997).

Commodification and the Changing Political Economy of the Media Industry

As has already been anticipated: the new media and information technology give an imperative towards scrutinising the changes in the political economy of the international media industry. The new technology has the potential to bring new organisations and industries to power. For instance, the commercial control over software and operative systems is at the moment linked to unknown ranges of powers, which is why the privileged market control of Microsoft is so furiously fought over in the American court rooms.

However, the emerging links between Internet, retailers and advertisers in the E-commerce business bring potentials for change, as is also visible in the present prizing of Internet companies at the world stockexchanges. Shifts in the political economy are also taking place in the old media, and Golding and Murdoch argue that the power over the future media industry will probably still lie with the old Media Moguls, who have a "... sizeable advantage, since they already own a formidable range of the expressive assets that are central to public culture, and this range is steadily increasing through acquisition, mergers and new partnerships" (1996: 23).

The critical political economy perspective advocates an important research strategy to these issues (Golding and Murdoch 1996: 25). National and regional deregulation in Western Europe has speeded up the trend towards ownership concentration in and across national boundaries.

For instance, in many countries where television broadcasting was until recently a state monopoly industry, there is now a hard market competition between private and public organisations. As a result, commercial and market-oriented management logics has penetrated the institutions of public service television, subjecting production routines, formats, styles and scheduling strategies more or less totally to intra-organisational monitoring and interpretation of market competition.

Politics and Popular Culture

The political economy perspective should be connected to studies on culture and commodification of symbolic forms. For instance, the role of the commercial mass media is central to a theory of a *promotional culture* and its impact on politics and society needs more attention. Here it is necessary, as Andrew Wernick reminds us, not to think of advertising and symbolic expressions as separate texts, but as intertextually connected to and embedded in culture at large (Wernick 1991: 93). If it ever was possible to imagine the existence of a pure political discourse aimed at educating and empowering citizens to participate in the production of a rational consensus in an ideal, public sphere, it now has become utterly problematic. Aesthetic forms and expressions, interpretations and signs in advertising, art, film talks shows and soaps are constantly penetrating and changing political and cultural discourses. The result is a total blurring of conventional categories like fiction and fact, information and entertainment, the popular and the sacred. How else are we for instance to understand the political implications of the visual campaigns of Benetton and Oliviero Toscani, or the cultural and social implications and meanings of Monika Lewinsky and the so called "Clinton Sex Scandal".

The experience of witnessing the political debates and events that took place in Washington, and the way in which they became mediated with speed and efficiency in electronic and graphic media, prompted a Norwegian newspaper editor to proclaim himself a post-modernist: what other concept could make sense of this nonsensical, soap of world politics?[1] Another comment suggested that Richard Sennet's theses on "The fall of public man" couldn't have been more lucidly proven.[2] And undoubtedly, the Lewinsky affair is full of paradoxes.

Although it was spurred by an acclaimed moral indignation about the fall of private virtue in American society and presented itself as an attempt to restore faith in US politics, it led to an extreme publicity about intimate episodes of the presidents sexual affairs, and turned news media all over the world into pseudo-pornographic media.

In the spring 1999, Miss Lewinsky was touring Europe in an attempt to promote her book and fund her future. To the local-global audiences she visited, she had herself become a sign, which was being exhibited and shown in public. Like the travelling circus of the 19th century, bringing around abnormal humans: the elephant man, the monster woman, the giant and the midget, she was being exposed as a mythical object. She was the woman that almost made an empire expire, almost made a president fall; a femme fatale and a modern Helena.

The Lewinsky affair was from the very start something more than a news story about a potential legal prosecution against the American president. And the media were strongly interwoven in the Clinton Sex Scandal, first of all through the spin doctor industry that was maneuvering at high speed on both sides. For the international press corps in Washington, the ability to report with balanced accuracy on both the intimate details and the constitutional problems that emerged in their wake became the assessment for high quality journalism. Through the immediate, availability of global audio-visual broadcasting, pictures from the hearings and Senate deliberations were received live by local audiences all over the world. However, the traditional news media encountered severe competition from the Internet where direct access to the Starr report was possible. The astonishing availability of the source text on the net inspired newspapers all over the world to print pornographic extracts from the report. A search on the web on Monica Lewinsky's name today brings access to thousands of web sites, many offering pornographic pictures and films, proving perhaps a very active audience appropriation of the political discourse. It is time to say welcome to the post-Lewinsky world of hard core techno-politics.

Returning to the Media Field

Returning to the more sober media field, these broad, crossdisciplinary challenges bring strong imperatives to particular forms of media research, both when it comes to choosing objects of analysis and the particular focus for research. To succeed in the ambition of doing crossdisciplinary research, media scholars must overcome the problems and structural constraints in the academic institutions, that I briefly commented upon in the beginning. Media research is practiced within the framework of university institutions, although increasingly also within private research organisations. Presently, it seems that particular domains of research, for instance audience research, are moving away from the universities into the hands of specialised research organisations with strong commercial interests. And as the hard, quantitative science increasingly gives way for the qualitative and linguistic turn, academic institutions are struggling to interpret their new role and status in the reflexive, knowledge society (Giddens 1990).

The ability for researchers to co-ordinate and conduct crossdisciplinary research is in my view weakened by the way academic institutions presently work and by the way research funding and research programs are organised. The vocational dimension in the media field continues to orient research projects towards the needs and aims of media professions, organisations and regulating authorities in the media field (see also Corner 1998: 9). The imperative of crossdisciplinarity means that media researchers have to transcend their present institutional borders in order to get a better grip on the macropolitical and macrosocial problematics. And they must systematically work to secure that crossdisciplinary research programs, defined outside their own field, integrate media and communication perspectives.

The struggle to define a core within the field itself is a hazardous effort, risking substituting old intellectual borders and institutional structures with new ones. At the same time, institutional pressures and structures in the field make it increasingly hard to live without it. It seems to be a considerable challenge: if the media field is to be understood as fundamentally crossdisciplinary, then researchers and students must come to grips with this situation and develop a better understanding of the characteristics of their own field. However, instead of being in search for stronger links to paternal disciplines and fields from a marginal, outside position, media researchers should strive to argue from a strong position: advocating for the need of social theory to improve their understanding of media and politics.

Reflections on the Epistemological Implications for Research Strategies

At the heart of the crossdisciplinary challenge is the question how research strategies can be or perhaps even should be developed within coherent, epistemological frameworks. The development of a hermeneutic or reflexive social theory places the processes of semiosis and signification in society and the production and reproduction of culture more at the centre of academic inquiry. For instance, the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Clifford Geertz and Anthony Giddens are often mentioned as particularly fruitful points of departure for media research. All three, it is argued, offer epistemological and meta-theoretical bridges to the traditional dichotomies of interpretive and causal, subjectivist and objectivist, hermeneutic and materialistic, approaches to studying society. Bridges which are indispensable if crossdisciplinarity should not remain a totally hollow concept.

Let me towards the end of this article comment on a book that I find particularly interesting in the way it elaborates an epistemological theory and formulate imperatives of research within the media field. In his challenging book The Social Semiotics of Mass communication, Klaus Bruhn Jensen lays out the foundations of a new theory of mass communication based on a rereading of the pragmatist tradition and the work of Charles S. Peirce. According to Bruhn Jensen, this reinterpretation of pragmatism can be seen as an "...attempt to reconcile ontological realism and epistemological constructivism" (Bruhn Jensen1995: 29). Bruhn Jensen's approach is mainly developed against the cultural studies tradition, and represents a *pragmatist turn*, away from semiotic studies of textual structures, advocating an emphasis on *socially situated texts*, which stress research on the social contexts and cultural aspects of semiosis. Bruhn Jensen argues that empirical research must follow what is called a generative model, mainly studying, in his words:

> ... the social practices in which, simultaneously, discourses are articulated and institutions reproduced. The Peircean interpretant suggests that meaning is performative, carries a predisposition to act, and makes a social difference. In order to identify the principles informing meaning production, there is a special call for empirical studies which relate the analysis and interpretation of meaning to a specific context

of action, within a theory of social semiotics (1995: 52).

Bruhn Jensen elaborates on the social theory of Giddens, and argues that this point of departure is better suited for mass communication research than for instance that of Bourdieu. Particularly, Giddens concepts of reflexivity, consciousness and his idea of double hermeneutics are seen as connecting to a Percien theory of semiosis. But according to Bruhn Jensen, Giddens concept of structuration is in need of revision when it comes to giving the structural dimension of signification the theoretic emphasis it deserves.

Bruhn Jensen argues that since society comes before the media, the focus of media research should actually be outside the media itself. According to the theory,

> politics does not reside in delimited institutions and actors, but in the practices of legislation and debate they facilitate; mass communication does not reside in media organisations or their discourses, but in the social and cultural practices that constitute their production, transmission and reception. (38)

This leads Bruhn Jensen to argue that the most important focus in media research is the site of reception. Of course, Bruhn Jensen also advocates that structural elements and institutional aspects, particularly the technological, economic and organisational aspects of media production are "...indispensable elements of mass communication research" (p. 61). However, while the epistemological theory and the pragmatism of Peirce are well argued as a sound basis for a social theory of the media, I find myself less clearly convinced about the argument that reception analysis should be on top of media research priorities. Bruhn Jensen develops his epistemological argument with an eye to his particular research interests on television reception. In my view, this attempt unnecessarily opens up for a kind of criticism that often runs against the cultural studies tradition: namely that their analysis do not in adequate forms focus on the way cultural products are produced within socially structured institutions and media industry complexes. This prevents a fuller understanding of the way mediated texts and symbolic goods are produced within social institutions exhibiting *structural properties*, which structure public discourse by promoting certain cultural forms over others (Golding and Murdoch 1996: 25).

Bruhn Jensen's argument indirectly restricts the methodological repertoires of crossdisciplinary research strategies within the media field. However, this should not be read as necessary and contingent on Bruhn Jensen's epistemological theory. Rather it should be seen as containing a potential for a broader methodological perspective, for instance also being a valuable contribution to studies on the site of media production.

Notes

1. Chief Editor Steinar Hansson in editorial, *Dagsavisen*, 1998.
2. Professor Bernt Hagtvedt, in a privat view comment in *Aftenposten*, 1998.

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