

Research Project

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Why Theories of Media and Communication?

In 1999 the Danish Research Council for the Humanities organized a seminar that was to take stock of the history and present state of Danish film and media studies. Here it clearly emerged that media studies in Denmark were not really constituted until the end of the sixties (cf. Bondebjerg 2000: 6).

If one takes a closer look at what has been published on media research in Denmark since then, it becomes clear that the main emphasis has been partly laid on empirical results, often in the form of analyses of media products, of audiences or of political-economical-institutional aspects, and partly on introductions to and elaborations of international theories (cf. Mortensen 2000, and Bondebjerg 2000). This weighting has been well founded, namely insofar as media studies have had to legitimise and consolidate themselves as a new field of research.

However, the consequence of this has been that reflections on media *theory* proper have been correspondingly toned down. Of course the analyses have been theoretically well-founded, and theoretical developments and discussions have taken place, but for one thing, the treatment of theories has tended to be what one could call *intentional* (with a few exceptions), i.e. directed towards something ‘outside’ the theories, namely instant analytical use and not (also) towards the theories ‘themselves’, and for another, the developments and discussions have often been set in motion by *international theoretical conditions*.

Today, with media research a well-consolidated discipline, one could raise the question of whether more space and time should not be set aside for reflections on media theory proper. The project “Theories of Media and Communication – Histories and Relevance” that was initiated on 1 January 2003, and

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is supported by the Danish Research Council for the Humanities in 2003 constitutes an effort to create a future forum for discussing media theory.

Objectives

The two main and related objectives of the project are as follows:

- To prioritise the field of media and communication *theory*, its histories and relevance, as an *independent* field of research within media and communication studies,
- To contribute to the development of media and communication theories, with particular emphasis on the *newest media* (the Internet and other digital media) and the *interaction* of these with existing media, largely in the light of and through systematic and critical readings of existing theories.

Approaches

To concentrate the focus of the project and to create a basis for further theoretical work, the above objectives will be concretely met through two independent but connected and complementary approaches:

On the one hand, through eight individual books, where a number of Danish media and communication scholars introduce and discuss central theoretical positions and themes of the field.

On the other hand, with a dictionary of concepts from media theory, theoretical movements, important theorists and so forth.

All nine volumes will be both individual and integrated. Each is written as an individual book that can be read independently, but at the same time they are connected: a) The first eight volumes are part of an overall structure, and are all written with the same overall principles as point of departure, b) the dictionary refers to more thorough presentations and

reference lists in the other volumes. As a whole, all nine volumes will provide a current and systematic overview and critical analysis of the existing theories and traditions.

Problems

To produce an edited work in nine volumes on theories of media and communication raises at least three types of problems relating to, respectively 1) the specific being of media and communication studies, 2) the question of presenting and 3) of editing the content.

First, media and communication studies constitute a broad, diverse and interdisciplinary complex, involving both the humanities and the social sciences as well as portions of the natural sciences (and within each of these main categories the field is also diverse and interdisciplinary). An introduction to and an overview of the theories used within media and communication studies must therefore appear different, according to what kind of media and communication studies is chosen to be the most important, or to be the point of departure and thereby the guiding principle.

Second, the problems of how to present the theories discussed. We have the general problem of wanting both to introduce and give an overview and to go in depth, as well as the simple fact that everything cannot be covered, and certainly not at the same time, which makes it necessary to make choices, split up, summarize, thematise, etc.

Third, the problem of editing individual (but connected) books written by different authors who (consciously or unconsciously) each have their own point of view and each write in their own style.

The task, then, is to find an overall frame for the volumes that makes it possible:

- In one and the same manoeuvre both to concentrate and to focus the diverse field of media and communication theories *and* to preserve and present this very diversity and interdisciplinarity as much as possible; and to ensure that there is an overall framework, but that this frame only to some extent 'controls' what is to be discussed (and what is not),
- Both to give an overview and to go in depth; both to present the essence and to create connections,
- To keep many and varied editors and authors together, without forcing them to write the same material in the same way.

The Overall Structure of the Books: The Analytical Objects

In order to meet these demands it has been decided, on the one hand, to focus on the analytical objects towards which the different theories are directed (e.g. by pointing out or discussing their being, their limits, etc.); on the other hand to organize these analytical objects in a 'communication model', thus creating an overall structure.¹

This has resulted in five volumes, each dealing with the theories of media and communication according to which of the following analytical objects treated by the theory: *Context, Sender, Message, Receiver and Medium*.

However (at least) two important analytical objects fall outside this structure, namely *communication* and the *history* of media and communication. Therefore these analytical objects will be dealt with in two additional volumes. And finally, also outside this structure a more general first volume will be written, discussing important fundamental concepts (theory, method, analysis, media, communication, etc.), as well as sketching the relation between the other volumes.

In this way the volumes are not connected by any sort of progression between them, but rather by being part of an overall structure; therefore each of them can be read independently of the others, and they can be read at random.

The Overall Structure of the Chapters

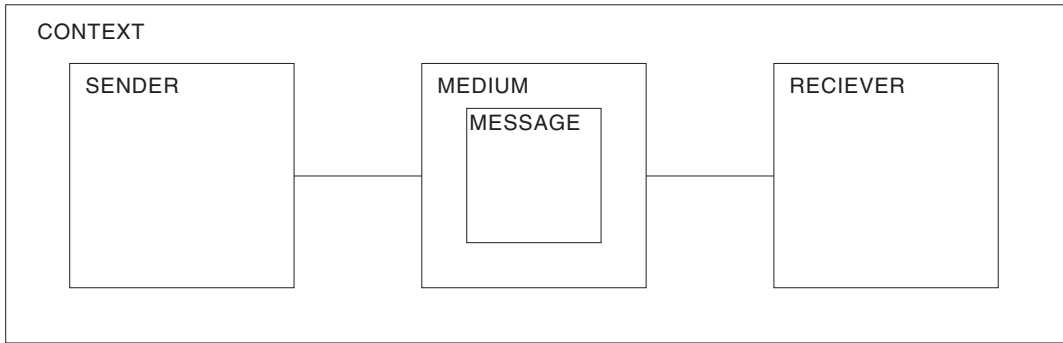
Two types of chapters are considered relevant (in vols. 2-8):

- Chapters focussing on theories about *approaches to or points of view on the analytical object* ("How to understand the 'content' of the field of analysis?")
- Chapters focussing on theories about *the analytical objects proper and the themes that characterize them* ("What themes characterize the analytical objects? How is the object delimited?")

The first type will typically deal with theoretical 'schools' or traditions (structuralism, hermeneutics...), while the others will typically treat of themes that emerge from the being of the analytical objects (narrativity, intertextuality, the visual, etc., e.g. concerning 'the message').

Hereby the overall structure of both books and chapters is given. The next step will then be to pro-

Figure 1.



pose a common form to what must be found in each of the chapters.

Types of Content of the Chapters

Each chapter should, as far as possible, contain *the same types of content* in order to make the volumes form a whole (there will, of course, be exceptions where this cannot be done).

These types of content should develop along four axes:

- The *axis of the history of theory*, where the presentation moves from the past to the present,
- The *axis of epistemology*, where the presentation moves from general epistemological questions towards questions specific to media and communication studies, and further towards questions specific to each type of media (and possibly to each type of genre),
- The *pedagogical axis*, where the presentation moves from introduction towards critical discussion,
- The *axis of complexity*, where the presentation moves from theories about the ‘simple’, to theories about the ‘complex or integral’ with regard to either the limits of the analytical fields² or the limits of the concrete media artefacts.

The presence of each of these four axes of content should guarantee:

- That both the history and the present state of the different theoretical traditions are presented,
- That the connection of each theory to media and communication studies is unequivocally put into focus, and that their media specificity (and possible genre specificity) is discussed,

- That the central concepts and insights of the most important positions are introduced as neutrally as possible, and that the different theoretical traditions are discussed,
- That the theories that work on the borders or that are integral are taken into account; first, the theories that thematise the borders between the analytical objects, and that may have the ambition of questioning these borders (for instance a move from the textual theories that are purely directed towards the texts (the “simple”) to more pragmatic textual theories that are closer to the theories of reception (the “complex/integral”); or the other way round: from theories of reception proper (the “simple”) to theories of reception that are also directed towards textual theories (the “complex/integral”)); second, theories thematising integral traits within the media they discuss (most clearly seen among theories about media “integrating” other media (the possible convergence of paper/book/film/radio/TV in the computer/the Internet)).

Finally, each volume (or chapter) should begin with a short overview of the most important theoretical traditions within the field in question.³

www.medieteori.dk

A website, www.medieteori.dk was established in connection with the research project. Here one can find more in-depth material on the project (continuously updated), a collection of resources (links of academic relevance as well as a list of publishers of books on media and communication theory), and finally a database with references to literature in the area of media and communication theory and to theories related to new media (at the moment the da-

tabase has about 350 references). The database contains not only references but also a copy of the table of contents of each book, as well as a link to the publishers' presentation of the book and the authors' web page. For anyone with an interest in theories of media and communication this database will be extremely relevant when searching for the newest material in the field.

Through the steps described above, this research project aims to create a concrete preliminary platform for future systematic work with media and communication theories, just as the books to be published in the years to come will contribute with introductions to and discussions of the field.

Notes

1. Speaking of 'communication model' is a bit misleading. What I have in mind here is a way of structuring and delimiting the fields of media and communication studies, and not how one could reflect the relations that might characterize a certain communication situation. This point is inspired by Brügger 2002.
2. Again, this does not apply to vols. 6 and 7 (on "Communication" and "The history of media and communication").
3. For a more extensive presentation of the books, see Brügger 2003, as well as the updates on www.medieteori.dk. The individual volumes have the following authors/editors: 1) *Media, Communication, Theory*, Niels Brügger, Associate Professor, PhD, Centre for Internet Research, Department of Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus,.2) *Theories of Media Contexts*, Niels Ole Finnemann, Centre Director, Associate Professor, dr.phil, Centre for Internet Research, Department of Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus, 3) *Theories of Media Senders*, Kirsten Frandsen, Associate Professor, PhD, Department of Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus, 4) *Theories of Media Messages*, Finn Frandsen, Centre Director, Associate Professor, MA, Centre for Business Communication, Aarhus School of Business, 5) *Theories of Media Receivers*, Kim Schrøder, Professor, MA, Department of Communication, Journalism and Computer Science, Roskilde University, 6) *Theories of the Me-*

dium, Niels Brügger, 7) *Theories of Communication*, Finn Frandsen, 8) *Theories of the History of Media and Communication*, Niels Kayser Nielsen, Associate Professor, MA, Department of History, University of Aarhus, 9) *Dictionary of Media and Communication Theory*, ed. Niels Brügger and Søren Kolstrup, Associate Professor, MA, Department of Information and Media Studies, University of Aarhus (and about ten sub-editors). The chief editors of the book project are Niels Brügger and Henrik Schjerner of the publishing house *Forlaget Samfundslitteratur*. All the books are published in Danish.

Literature

- Bondebjerg, Ib (2000) Hovedstrømninger i dansk film- og medieforskning, *Mediekultur*, 31, Århus.
- Brügger, Niels (2002) Theoretical Reflections on Media and Media History, in Brügger, N. & Kolstrup, S. (eds.) *Media History: Theories, Methods, Analysis*, Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, pp. 33-66.
- Brügger, Niels (2003) "Medie- og kommunikationsteorier – historie og aktualitet", www.medieteori.dk (January), Århus. Available online: http://www.medieteori.dk/publikationer/medie-og-kommunikationsteori_bogprojekt.pdf
- Mortensen, Frands (2000) Dansk medieforskning igennem de seneste 30 år. En kommentar til SHF's fagseminar om dansk film- og medievidenskab", *Mediekultur*, 31, Århus.