

Doing the Right Thing

Passion, Politics and Plurality

Margareta Melin

Doing the right thing was the theme I was asked to reflect upon as a kind of *Vote from the Swedish jury* on a final reflexive plenary panel putting a P on the NordMedia11 conference in Akureyri, Iceland. My mission, which I chose to accept, was to peer at keynote plenaries, panels and papers presented at the conference and make presumptions concerning possible pure paths for Media and communication researchers.

This topic could become a case of preposterously pompous point-scoring. To avoid this, I enlisted the help of many a pal and conference participant and together we scouted the Nordmedia11 conference for interesting panels and papers that could enlighten the theme of doing the right thing. This was an easy task.

Using this co-operative scouting as a basis, here I will present thoughts on how we – as Nordic, media researchers – can do the right thing. I will focus this reflection on three issues, three Ps: Passion, Politics and Plurality. This might sound predictable and too PC but is really a personal pondering.

Passion

Passion, the first of the three Ps is perhaps the most important. The academic world seems to me to be in a process of losing its passion. Let me give you two prevalent examples.

Swedish media and communication studies are now going through a process of quality assessment. I do not question quality assessment as such. Quite the contrary, I believe that the internal process of questioning one's own practices is necessary and productive, and can indeed itself ensure quality and serve as the starting point for creative processes. Furthermore, I believe that colleagues critiquing each other can induce new ways of seeing the familiar, as does Norwegian educationalist Gunnar Handal (1999), who argues for the use of *critical friends* to improve and assure quality in everyday educational practices.

The problem with the Swedish quality assurance process is, thus, not its existence, but its overall political position of seeing quality as a result. And result means honours, dissertations/degree work. The problem arises when *results* per se, and not learning processes or quality assurance, are being rated (HSV 2011). And policed.

Another policing issue is that Nordic scholars are all haunted by pressures of publish-or-perish! And not just anywhere! Books, political debates in newspapers, national

journals – where we can write and express ourselves in our own language – are out! Anglo-Saxon peer-reviewed periodicals are in!

Universities all over the Nordic countries are competing to create scoring systems. Again, the problem is not the system, but the pre-supposed principles of *what* kind of publishing in *which* periodicals are preferable. This has implications on several levels. There are disciplines whose publishing tradition relies heavily on monographs, and analysis of particular Nordic media, literary or theatre topics are not easily publishable in Anglo-Saxon journals. But such work imparts important knowledge in a Nordic context.

Another problem is that the so-called “third role” of universities, i.e. to communicate with the public, to popularize research and to cooperate and collaborate with the relevant professional industry, which requires media other than academic peer-reviewed journals. These media in turn may also require a different linguistic style, but just as much time and professional competence. Still they give no publishing points.

On a personal level this has career implications. A professor pal of mine pronounced the other day that he had realized that the point-scoring policy at his university had rendered his yard-long list of publications perfectly worthless. With books and articles about Swedish topics, published in Swedish or in Nordic journals, his aggregated publishing points have become almost worthless over night.

My main point is, however, that for many Nordic scholars, expressing oneself in a language one has not mastered completely is difficult. Grammar and academic jargon are easy enough to manage, but the fine-tuned precision of wording and idiomatic style is more problematic. And that is what makes writing passionate and texts a pleasure to read.

I propose, therefore, that we try not to forget our passion! We must not let the process of policing and point-scoring stand in the way of us doing the research we feel passionately about – that is important, fun or interesting. My point here is not to over-problematize, but to see positive trends. And at the Nordmedia11 conference, I have seen plenty of those. I have heard and read passionate presentations and papers.

...as to the status for female journalists in the Nordic countries and the world. Maria Edström (2011) and Tarja Savolainen and Henriikka Zilliacus-Tikkanen (2011) presented papers based on the Global Report on the Status of Women in News Media (International Women’s Media Foundation, 2011). They discussed the fact that Nordic countries are at the top of the class, and problematized the patriarchal structures still underlying Nordic newsrooms.

...about a Swedish city going digital into Second Life. Stina Bengtsson (2011) delves into development and failure of the virtual city of Malmö through a discussion on consumer culture, civic engagement and the logic of capitalism.

...about motherhood being constructed through blogs. Karen Hvidtfeldt Madsen (2011) problematizes parenthood by looking at blogs belonging to couples and singles as part of an increasingly commercial consumer culture, where conception, pregnancy and parenthood are constructed in public weblogs, and where pregnancy and giving birth are renegotiated.

...about social media as sites of social change and global exchange. Political media activism or public disobedience in North Africa was discussed theoretically as an imperative means for civic society and culture in the process of political liberation and democratization for citizens in oppressed states (Krona and Bergknut 2011).

All these presentations and papers were relayed with curiosity, interest and passion, with powerful and prominent research results.

That is doing the right thing!

In the different divisions, I also heard commentators giving passionate positive critique and igniting interesting debates, as well as coming up with new research questions. They also gave presenters practical input about turning papers into publications. This is academic practice at its best, when constructively critical friends (Handal 1999) passionately discuss research results produced through a passion-driven research process.

That is doing the right thing!

Politics

The second concern is Politics. I am a feminist researcher and to me all research, all knowledge, is political – whether researchers like it or not. Feminist philosophers have long propagated for the personal as political, and for the fact that knowledge is always situated in time, in space, in bodies. Every object and each person is a bearer of knowledge (cf. Haraway 1991). This means, of course, that my personal ponderings in the present article are really political point-making, and that the collaborative conference scouting was carried out only at certain sessions, which signifies our particular perspectives. It also means that we, as media and communication researchers or as private persons, cannot free ourselves from our bodies, from our thoughts – and hopefully not from our passion.

To me this means assuming responsibility for one's research and knowledge and the consequences of both. It means being reflexive, being aware of one's power as a researcher and always taking an ethical perspective into every project. For example, reflecting on the powered relationship between the researcher and the researched could (and I believe should) result in the researcher placing her-/himself on the same plane as the researched. That way the research object becomes a subject and the researcher a subjective person – with reflexive responsibility for the political knowledge produced (cf. Melin 2008).

This is *not* pointless PC:ness, but for media and communications researchers doing research on – and with – people and the public, this is fundamental to the validity of research. This is also not old news. These philosophical and ethical problems are continuously and critically considered and debated, for example in the Nordmedia division *Theory, Philosophy and Ethics of Communication*, where issues such as the importance of epistemology in communication theory (Kirtiklis 2011), conceptions of democracy (Karpinen 2011), and the concept of conjuncture and media and communication studies (Koivisto 2011) were discussed. Philosophical disputes were debated in other divisions. Hallvard Moe and Anders Larsson (2011), for example, discussed new possibilities for the study of online public communication and pointed to the fact that media and communication researchers need to critically assess the practices of new methodological tools, as well as to ethically renegotiate the borders between private and public.

That is doing the right thing!

Recognizing politics of knowledge does not only mean reflecting on research ethics and design. It also means studying problems with political potential. Because with this political knowledge, we have a duty to influence and *to change!* We should not sit com-

fortably in our ivory tower, leaning against distantly and objectively created pillars of statistics, but work *with* and place ourselves *in the midst*.

And ask questions.

But why?

What are the consequences of my research?

What happens when we do the right thing?

Whose right thing is it anyway?

At this conference, I have heard and read papers and listened to discussions that dealt with truly political agendas and asked political questions.

How do we – as researchers – act to change the patriarchal structure of journalism?

Plenty of papers in different divisions debated patriarchal power in particular – with an aspiration to change (e.g., Edström 2011; Savolainen & Zilliakus-Tikkanen 2011; Melin 2011). Johanna Mäkelä (2011) expanded these discussions to include gendered political communication and how the media, in the present changing political cultures, focus on women in political decision-making positions. She showed that the position of politicians in political parties is clearly defined by visibility in the media as well as how gender affects the quality of publicity.

What's this social media hype all about?

Plenty of papers about the new media landscape were presented, asking political questions that went beyond the technology-driven and hipster-consumer hype. Social media, like Google, Twitter, Flickr, Facebook, were probed and scrutinized in interesting ways.

Can social media tools in fact be seen as a social innovation per se? This is a question that Pernilla Severson (2011) asks, and in her paper she tries to understand social media practices in a civiness context. By using Twitter both as a study object and a method, her result shows the intricate ongoing weaving of connecting practices, and she discusses social media not only in terms of in-vogue dynamic communities, but turns towards traditional feminist thinking and argues that Twitter turns the personal into the political.

Christian Fuchs (2011) critically analyzed the political economy of Google, and posed questions about how Google's commodity production, distribution and consumption process works. Google bases its economy on prosumer commodity, i.e. a combination of consumers unpaid work and WWW content creators.

In an analysis of social media criticism and accountability based on textual analysis of internet newspapers with comments and blogs, Göran Svensson (2011) turned to Wikileaks and asked *who* is watching the new media watchdogs? How do social media reflect on their own performance while appraising the performance of other media?

What should journalists actually be for in a new media world?

Changing power relations between producer and consumers (what Fuchs (2011) calls prosumers), between professionals and private amateurs, was the focus of several papers. One example of this is Helle Sjøvaag's (2011) critical paper. Her perspective was to ask what happens to news producers' professional ideals when they are forced to balance between the demands of journalism as an institutional agency, on the one hand, and the structural forces currently presenting the profession with ideological confrontations, on the other.

And what are the media or journalism anyway?

The so-called new media turn not only the producer-consumer, but also the professional-amateur relationship upside down. This potentially put into question the very practice of journalism, which is the perspective of Christina Neumayer's (2011) paper. She argues for an alternative understanding of online media, basing this on a study of anti-fascist protests in East Germany 2010-2011. By doing so she asks critically if the so-called social web provides spaces for critical perspectives and counterpublics, or whether this leads to so-called mainstream slogans for the mobilization and polarization of radical political perspectives?

How can we rethink "proper" journalism from an other perspective?

Asking political questions about new media in a Nordic media and communication context does not mean asking questions about Nordic issues. Indeed, to understand the new media scene, it is important to take a different perspective, that is, to learn from others, which in the NordMedia11 conference meant peering – not towards the west – but south and eastwards. In the NordMedia division *Media, Globalisation and Social Change*, political perspectives from developing countries were plentiful, and perhaps the most piercing political papers elucidating the so-called new media were presented in this division.

Because the media spotlight was turned on the Northern African process of political liberation this spring, it was quite predictable that there would be papers written from this perspective (cf. Krona & Bergknut 2011). The public's political use of new media in other non-western parts of the globe, however, has been less publicized. Several papers went south of the Sahara. Ekström, Høg Hansen and Boothby (2011) discussed how the use of social media in Tanzania has progressed from oral storytelling and traditional pavement radio. They explored how popular media practices cope with people in power, by engaging with and constructing rumour, public memory and civic spaces.

There were, however, also papers on the political use of so-called "old media", and how these could bring about political change. This was considered by Helge Rønning (2011), who asked questions about the legitimacy of power and the possibilities for opposition in Africa. Moreover, Hilde Arntsen (2011) looked at whether humour political twist could be seen as freedom of expression and a path towards political commentary.

That is doing the right thing!

Plurality

The third problem is Plurality.

Kjartan Ólafsson commenced the conference saying that a good conference depends on how good the participants are. How true that is!

My first NordMedia conference was in Trondheim in 1993. At that point, the participating Media researchers had their disciplinary home in political science, literature studies, psychology, sociology and musicology, and journalists and PR officers from the media industry attended the conferences.

Since then, Media and Communication Studies, Media and Culture Studies and Journalism have become proper academic subjects. And these have, by necessity, gathered

force, and distinguished themselves from others – narrowed the field. Thus, there has been a period during which we all have been media and communication or journalism researchers. This has indeed been a dominant process in Sweden, and has been seen as a positive development as well as one of the primary purposes of the past decade of FSMK, the Swedish National Media and Communications Research Organisation.

Then look around! At this conference there are *also* art historians, interaction designers, law professors, philosophers, and there are researchers from the Baltic countries, from Russia, the Netherlands, The US, Austria, Greece, Germany and Bangladesh. The three most recently appointed Media- and communications professorial chairs in Sweden are from Austria, England and Canada. We are going interdisciplinary and international. But still, look around! We are an ocean of white faces with but a few exceptions.

Why is this trend of plurality important?

John Peters suggested in his plenary session at this conference that we should study the blind spots. I believe some spots are so blind to us that we cannot see them without help. We need new perspectives, new research questions, in order to gain new understandings of the media and communication field that is so familiar to us. And we do not need to probe into post-colonial theory to realize that doing research *with* and not *on* people in the developing world generates more valid knowledge.

Going interdisciplinary is, hence, another way of both expanding and making our research more valid. Thus, a journalism *and* a law professor together can produce thought-provoking new knowledge; the purpose of Maria Edström's *and* Eva-Maria Svensson's (2011) paper was to study the debate between the pro-freedom and the freedom-under-responsibility parties on the issue of giving commercial advertising the same protection as political speech. They problematized what consequences strengthening the legal base for commercial interests in the media would have for freedom of speech.

This is doing the right thing!

In Jyväskylä in 1997, a discussion took place on where media studies are (were) going. The set-up was to pit old professors versus new hot-shot scholars. And the debates were heated! One man from the audience (I can't remember whom) stood up and asked passionately, "So if you say the media are not just the press, TV, radio... soon you want to start research on... on postcards!" Johan Fornäs (then one of the young hot-shots, now reputable professor) answered: "Yes, and wouldn't that be interesting!"

I haven't seen any post-card studies, but in this conference I have seen analyses of far more media than the press, radio and TV. As our ways of mediating communication change through new technology, we need to continuously rethink our objects of study. At the same time, we must not get hung-up on so-called *new* media. Innovations and technological products come and go. And old media can give new knowledge.

The paper I personally presented at the conference could be an example of plurality, playing with the patriarchally powered spaces of journalism, art and academia, at the intersection between old media (text and textile) met new media (sms, digital sewing-machines). The research party behind the paper consists of interaction design, art history, journalism, and media and culture studies scholars, PhD students and senior researchers – artists with different forms of expression: relational, performance, music, and textile. Taking this patchwork of professions and practices as a point of departure, we explored what happens in the seams between two particular platforms of storytelling: the editorial board and a sewing circle placed in an art gallery. Thus, by using something known and

placing it in a different context, in a different space, we challenge the very practice of the editorial board, of journalism. We call the method used “an editorial sewing circle”, and this should be seen as feminist action research, and an intervention into established rooms, concepts and practices. The presented paper was published in two parts: a collaborative textual part and a collaborative textile part. The former lies comfortably in the hands of our fellow academics. The textile text is, however, yet another way for us to cross dichotomies and to challenge powered doxas (Bourdieu 1998). With all these methods, we have thus been both working within the power and creating new action spaces (Melin, Ståhl, Lindström, and Rosenqvist 2011).

That, I believe, is doing the right thing!

Postscript

I will put a P to these proceedings by pausing to address a question my colleague, interaction designer Amanda Bergknut, posed at the conference: “Why do you media researchers just ask if you are doing the right thing? You also need to ask if you’re doing the thing right!”

To do the thing (media and communication research) right, I believe we need to turn back to the politics of research. We must not forget that we are researchers with responsibilities, and we need to probe into philosophical, epistemological, and ethical problems and constantly carry this with us when we do research.

We need to pose pertinent, political, passionate questions that are fun and interesting to probe into.

We need to step down from our ivory tower and do research *with* people. And we need to involve a plurality of people coming from a wide variety of perspectives and places in the production of knowledge.

We should open up to new practices, allowing doing to inform thinking and thinking to inform doing.

Passionate, political media research from a plurality of perspectives!

That is doing the right thing, and the thing right!

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MARGARETA MELIN, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor, School of Arts and Communication (K3), Malmö University, margareta.melin@mah.se