Doing the Right Thing

Media and Communication Studies in a Mediatized World

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"Doing the right thing?" was the general theme – and question – of the NordMedia 2011 conference in Iceland and it provided an interesting opportunity for the research community to call for thorough self-reflection about the present status of the field and the future development of media and communication studies. The field of media and communication studies in the Nordic countries has not only been growing quantitatively in terms of numbers of university study programs, researchers, and published articles (Koivisto and Thomas, 2008; Nordenstreng, 2011), but also has expanded in a qualitative sense: the field has matured through theoretical, historical, and methodological contributions and has broadened its scope and embraced the whole palette of new media and communication phenomena in almost all spheres of society. Today, media and communication studies deal with everything from early documentary film to geo-tagging in mobile media, from political campaigning to web-based learning.

The story of media and communication studies must no doubt be labeled a success story: within a limited number of decades, the field has managed to develop from a small and fragmented research area with almost no institutional foundation to a major research discipline with a solid institutional basis in most universities. This is not merely due to our own efforts and excellence, I hasten to say. A combination of the growing importance of media in society and the buzz and glamour of the media industry and technologies has enlarged media and communication departments' symbolic capital and in many cases made them extremely attractive in the eyes of students and thereby ensured a steady growth in departments' economic funding in an increasingly market-driven higher education system. Media is no longer a fringe subject in universities, but has become a key research and teaching discipline often providing an economic surplus that allows universities to provide subsidies to older and less successful subject areas with declining student interest. In other words, we have moved from the periphery to the center of academia.

So our response to the question posed by the conference theme from an institutional point of view certainly could be answered in the affirmative: Yes, we are doing the right thing! However, I will not go further down the road of self-acclamatory speech on behalf of our research field, but rather engage in a less festive, yet important discussion of emerging problems in our field. I will focus on two developments concerning the field of media and communication studies that so far have supported each other, but increasingly may come into conflict with one another: the *institutionalization* of the field of media

and communication studies and the *mediatization* of culture and society. The growing importance of media in culture and society has generally provided the *raison d'être* for the institutionalization of the field in higher education and key questions concerning the role of media in public life (power over political communication, socialization of attitudes and behavior, representation and interpretation of culture, etc.) have provided the emerging discipline with a series of common themes, despite the often very different theoretical and methodological approaches.

Today, the processes of institutionalization and mediatization may not work to the same extent in tandem and support continuous development towards a coherent and shared discipline of media and communication studies. The mediatization of culture and society may potentially fragment the institutional framework of the field by broadening the range of possible research interests to the point where there are no connections left between the various parts. Furthermore, mediatization will gradually make it more and more obvious to other disciplines that they should address the role of media in culture and society and thereby they will come to compete institutionally with our own discipline. Mediatization, however, may also provide an opportunity to re-address some of the fundamental issues that helped constitute the field of research in the first place, but now considered in a new cultural and social context of intensified mediatization. Changing the focus from mediation to mediatization may help keep track of some of the key questions and topics that may still render media and communication studies a candidate for a research discipline, and not just a plethora of disconnected topics. In the following, I will briefly outline the two processes of institutionalization and mediatization and then discuss the possible conflicting developments at stake.

A Half-baked Discipline

Media and communication studies as a research field is, obviously, defined by its specific subject matter, the media and non-mediated forms of communications. As such, it differs from major academic disciplines like sociology or biology that deal with more general and fundamental aspects of human society or nature. Media and communication studies, therefore, was not born as a genuine discipline, but rather as a cross-disciplinary venture bringing together people from a variety of existing disciplines and subject areas. As one of the American pioneers Wilbur Schramm observed in 1959, communication research "is one of the great crossroads where many pass but few tarry. Scholars come into it from their own disciplines, bringing valuable tools and insights, and later go back, like Lasswell, to the more central concerns of their disciplines" (Schramm, 1959: 8). The mix of disciplines involved has varied considerably from country to country, but in general the social sciences, the humanities, psychology, and technology studies have played a role in the development of the field. In the Nordic countries, the humanities have played a more prominent role compared to European and especially North American countries, but also within the Nordic countries there have been differences. In Denmark and Norway, the humanities have had a more prominent position in the field compared to Sweden, where the social sciences and psychology have had a somewhat greater influence on media studies. In Finland, independent journalism and mass communication studies were established within universities at an earlier point compared to the other Nordic countries (Carlsson 2007).

A common feature of Nordic research furthermore has been its focus on mediated forms of communication. For instance, Nordicom publications for all practical purposes have been concerned with media, and in earlier times exclusively mass media. Non-mediated forms of communication like speech or non-verbal communication have received very little attention and been researched outside the Nordic community of media research. This is, however, beginning to change, because the proliferation of various forms of interpersonal and networked media makes such a separation of research domains unproductive. As all forms of communication, one-to-many, one-to-one and many-to-many, have become not only mediated, but also intertwined with various forms of speech and non-verbal communication, there has been a renewed dialogue between the two formerly separated domains.

The general success of media and communication research has not only made the field larger, but also transformed the field itself. Besides the various fashion trends in theories and methodologies, there has also been a qualitative differentiation and reorganization of the field. This is certainly not a particularly Nordic development, but part of a much wider international tendency. In an overview of communication studies in the United States, Craig and Carlone (1998: 78) observe that the explosive quantitative growth is only one part of the story, because "the field has grown perhaps as much by redefinition and expansion of its subject matter as by quantitative accumulation. Central to this evolution has been the increasing salience and richness of the term 'communication' itself". From a media studies perspective, the term "media" has acquired a similar semantic richness as the study of mass media, like press, radio, and television, has evolved into a much more complex research agenda concerning an expanded and differentiated digital media ecology.

Another important consequence of the expansion of the field is a decline in general perspectives. As Donsbach (2006: 447) noted in his presidential address to the International Communication Association, ICA, in 2005, "research questions become smaller and more remote all the time". As more and more researchers enter the field and compete for distinction, the more detailed studies we get of any particular phenomenon. This may, at least in principle, be considered a sign of maturity in the research field, since more and more questions are subject to thorough investigation and not only cursory attention. However, if such detailed studies are not framed within broader theoretical perspectives and general hypotheses, for instance due to a lack of consensus about key issues in the field, they may contribute to a fragmentation, rather than consolidation, of knowledge. Ulla Carlsson, who has headed the Nordicom cooperation for several decades, clearly sees a lack of unity and states that the research area of "media and communication is variegated in the extreme, and few syntheses embrace the field as a whole [..]. Specialization, which is not always solidly founded in theory or methodology, may cause the field to disintegrate into small groups, each a discursive community unto itself" (Carlsson, 2005: 545).

The strong institutionalization of the field in terms of a growing number of media and communication departments and study programs has to some degree worked as a counterbalance to fragmentation and forced the field to transform itself into a research discipline with a defined corpus of preferred theories, methodologies, and dominant foci of interest. In actual university politics, to institutionalize very often means to become a discipline. In order to establish curricula for study programs and negotiate funding for

research with the dean or chancellor, you need the authority of a well-defined research discipline. As Koivisto and Thomas (2008: 225) argue, however, the disciplinary unity in the case of media and communication studies is more due to institutional pressures than achieved through "intellectual and scholarly means". In effect, media and communication studies may still be a half-baked discipline. Through institutionalization it has been able to construct the external characteristics of a discipline, but it still lacks some of the internal coherence of traditional disciplines with elaborated and widely accepted theories, concepts, and methodologies. We should be careful, of course, not to overestimate the internal consistency of major disciplines like biology or sociology. They are also subject to a high degree of differentiation, and new sub-fields and cross-disciplinary research areas emerge both inside and on the borders of older disciplines as well.

The paradox is that media and communication research is getting more differentiated, specialized and, to some extent, involved in more interdisciplinary work at a point in time when the researchers themselves have become more similar in terms of their formal educational backgrounds. The field of media and communication research was founded by people from a wide variety of disciplines with no formal education in media and communication. Today, the majority of researchers do not come from other disciplines, but have formal degrees in media and communication studies. A survey among ICA members in 2005 revealed that almost 2/3 of the members graduated with degrees in communication studies, and ¾ of the younger researchers had been studying in the field they are teaching today (Donsbach, 2006: 440). To my knowledge, this development reflects the situation in the Nordic countries as well. As a result, younger researchers may have a stronger sense of the field's characteristics than do their predecessors, but they may be less capable of deploying theories and methodologies from other disciplines for the study of media and communication.

A New Context: Mediatization

In conjunction with major transforming processes of high modernity, like globalization, urbanization, and individualization, modern societies are increasingly being influenced by mediatization. Mediatization generally refers to the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (e.g., politics, religion, and education) become influenced by and dependent on the media. As a consequence, the activity is to a greater or lesser degree performed through interaction with various media, and the symbolic content and the structure of social and cultural activities are influenced by the *modus operandi* of the media, i.e., their institutional, aesthetic, and technological affordances (Hjarvard, 2008a, 2008b; see also Lundby, 2009). Mediatization implies a change not only in the degree of media influence on cultural and social affairs, but also in the very way we may conceptualize the media-society relationship. Mediatization involves a double-sided development in which media emerge as semi-autonomous institutions in society at the same time they become integrated into the very fabric of human interaction in various social institutions like politics, business, or family.

This provides a new context for understanding media and their social and cultural importance. Media are not outside society exerting an effect on society, but their importance may increasingly be understood by their very presence *inside* society: being simultaneously a semi-autonomous institution and integrated into other social institutions. In the

research tradition of effect studies, media were often studied as independent variables exerting an influence on dependent variables like human opinion or behavior. From a very different – and to some extent opposite – perspective, reception studies emphasized the powerful media user as an independent agent who could make use of media for his or her own purposes. In both cases, the media were explicitly or implicitly considered an external factor – either exerting influence from the outside or being instruments that human agents are free to use or not to use. These approaches to media research of course may still have some validity when studying more isolated instances of mediated communication, e.g., diffusion of specific messages or the use of a particular medium for specific purposes. But as a framework to understand the general influence of media in society, they have become outdated.

The conception of media as being an external factor from the outset may have been theoretically flawed, but it may nevertheless have reflected the fact that individual media in earlier times were not to the same extent part of a general and converging media system, but emerged as separate communication technologies to be used for a variety of cultural and social purposes. For instance, more than a century ago, the press came to serve the political institution as the "party press" and as such the press had not yet emerged as a media institution in its own right and politics had not yet become mediatized in its internal functioning. In a way, the political party and its affiliated social movements were the political medium of those days, and not the press as such. The press was one among other communication channels for political messages. Today, news media have become semi-independent institutions that co-construct the political agenda through interaction with political actors (Cook, 1998) at the same time as the political institution itself has become mediatized and influenced by various forms of media logic (Strömbäck, 2008). Historical transformations – including the process of mediatization – force us to consider the influence of media on social and cultural affairs in a new way; i.e., media have become institutionalized in society, and thereby exert an influence vis-à-vis other institutions, at the same time they have become embedded within other institutions and thereby become appropriated for various new practices.

The process of mediatization has already expanded the field of media and communication studies and this is likely to become even more pronounced in the future. When media become part of nearly all kinds of cultural and social activities, the proliferation of still more specialized research fields seems overwhelming: from environmental communication to educational media, from science communication to marketing in social media. On the one hand, this looks promising for the future of media and communication research, but on the other hand, media and communication topics are beginning to migrate into other fields and disciplines, such as health communication in medicine and political marketing in political science. Increasingly, other study programs are equipped with a media and communication component that covers certain aspects of special interest for the field in question.

The growing specialization both within media and communication studies and in other research fields certainly may be useful in many ways, but it also implicates a fragmentation and instrumentalization of the field. Many sub-fields have developed in response to the emergence of particular media technologies and are predominantly involved in applied research. In other disciplines, the study of media and communication comes to serve the rationale of the particular sub-field in question and may lose sight of general

questions concerning the media-society nexus. Other disciplines cannot be expected to address fundamental questions concerning media's role in culture and society and will usually think of media in a more narrow sense, i.e., as channels of communications. From their perspective, media are often considered from a prescriptive and instrumental point of view: e.g., how to use educational media as tools of learning or how media may help to increase awareness about major health problems. Even social sciences like sociology and political science are reluctant to take up the broader media issues, leaving media and communication studies as the sole candidate to perform that task. As Peter Golding lamented after reviewing the social sciences' lack of interest in these matters: "If research into the social aspects of the media is not being done within the mainstream of the social sciences, who *will* do it?" (Golding, 2005: 540; emphasis in original)

From Mediation to Mediatization

The fragmentation and instrumentalization of the field are inevitable, and are healthy signs of the importance of media and communication questions in almost all spheres of society. But precisely because of this, we need to deepen our understanding of fundamental and – in my opinion – discipline-defining questions concerning the role and influence of media in contemporary society. One important way to achieve this, I suggest, is to refocus our attention *from mediation to mediatization*. Let me first start by making the distinction between the two clear. Mediation denotes the concrete act of communication by means of a medium and the choice of medium may influence both the content of communication and the relationship between sender and receiver. The process of mediation itself, however, usually does not change culture and society. By contrast, mediatization refers to a more long-lasting cultural and social transformation, whereby society's institutions and modes of interaction are changed as a consequence of the growth of the media's influence. In short, mediation is about communication and interaction through a medium, mediatization is about the role of media in cultural and social change. Some researchers do not make a clear distinction between the two terms, and some, for instance Silverstone (2007), use the term mediation in a way that resembles the present definition of mediatization. The above-mentioned distinction, however, seems to have achieved a certain acceptance, and allows us to distinguish between the analysis of instances of mediated communication and the analysis of the role of media in cultural and social transformation (see also Livingstone, 2009: 27ff).

With a shift in focus from mediation to mediatization, we may evoke a renewed interest in fundamental questions concerning how media come to influence patterns of power, interaction, and representation in culture and society, but now considered in a new light. The new context is not simply the advent of new media, although this is of course an important component. We are now living in a new media ecology in which new media have not only achieved an important position, but the entire media system has been subject to change. Old mass media have been renewed and found different niches in which they thrive and interact with various forms of networked media and interpersonal communication. The new context is also the paradoxical, double-sided development in which media have become institutionalized as semi-autonomous actors, as well as integrated into the everyday practices of other institutions. In the vocabulary of Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory, media are simultaneously being *disembedded* from

social institutions (e.g., the party press is succeeded by independent news media) and *reembedded* into the workings of institutions (e.g., the professionalization of political communication in political parties).

A focus on processes of mediatization may help us continue the development of our field into a discipline. It will orient the field to a set of key questions that have already been examined in the past, but which need to be developed further and not least considered in a new context. Mediatization studies imply a holistic approach in which we consider various dimensions of the media-culture-society nexus, for instance by looking at the influences of media in their capacity to be simultaneously channels, languages, and environments (Meyrowitz, 1993). Like the study of globalization or individualization, the research on mediatization does not entail a fixed set of theories or methodologies, but is an agenda for scientific enquiry. Such an agenda is not a call for more inward-looking studies concentrating on the media themselves. Mediatization studies address the transformation of a variety of social and cultural institutions and phenomena, and in order to examine these processes we need to talk to other disciplines such as political science, sociology of religion, and educational studies. However, as Craig (2008) has rightly observed, if we as media and communication scholars want to engage in interdisciplinary dialogue, we must be able to bring something to the table from our own disciplinary viewpoint "that adds real value to the interdisciplinary enterprise" (Craig, 2008: 687). In my opinion, mediatization studies may assist our field to develop theories and analyses that will help us do exactly this.

Mediatization, finally, does not imply that media come to influence the various spheres of society in the same way, so each of these need to be studied in empirical detail. Mediatization processes may share certain key characteristics across various cultural fields and social institutions, but they do not homogenize these fields and institutions. As Hepp (2009: 154) has aptly phrased it, the value of mediatization theory lies in its ability to "link these different detailed studies to a more general analysis of media power within cultural change". There is not one recipe for doing the right thing in media and communication studies, and there are, of course, many ways to help advance the field other than focusing on mediatization. In view of the growing fragmentation of the field, a focus on mediatization may, nevertheless, help us to make sense of the proliferation of media in various sectors of culture and society (which is partly responsible for the very fragmentation of the field itself), while we at the same time concentrate our attention on a set of issues that has been pivotal for the development of the field in the first place. In the previous decades we have been successful in building the external foundations of a discipline. In order to be equally successful in the coming years, we may need to pay more attention to what constitutes the inner dimensions – theories, methodologies, and empirical foci – of our still half-baked discipline.

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