Doing the Right Thing

In the Wake of the Explosion of Journalism

Kristin Skare Orgeret

One thing is certain, the Icelandic Organizing Committee did a good thing in deciding on the topic for the 20th NordMedia conference this year: *Nordic Media Research – Doing the Right Thing?*. That was a very timely and opportune choice. In many of the presentations during this conference, both in the plenary sessions and in the divisions, we have seen how the thematic question of the conference has served as motivation for self-reflection. Are we doing the right thing in our different sub-fields of the larger field of media studies? Self-reflexivity and self-scrutiny of our own methods and approaches are important, and perhaps more today than ever.

The new media technology has definitely opened up the field of media and communication research in new ways. Digital media technology changes the media, as we used to know them as research objects, and this has interesting and important effects on our multifaceted research field. Alongside the convergence of previously distinct media technologies, there has also been a convergence in journalism of the roles of journalists and audiences. Where does this leave us as media researchers? In his new book that came out this summer with the telling title *The Explosion of Journalism – From Mass Media to Media of the Masses,* Ignacio Ramonet argues that we have all become 'prosumers', we are producing and consuming our media at the same time (2011). The explosion of social media may be illustrated by numbers: There are presently 650 millions subscribers to Facebook and 175 million to Twitter. Simultaneously, Ramonet describes a general feeling of "information insecurity", which may explain why only 27% of the French trust the media, an even smaller percentage than those who trust the banks.

The possible hegemonic shift between traditional media institutions and actors, media companies and practicians with a history of producing professional journalism in old media, and new media institutions, often with no prior affiliation with professional journalism, is core here. While the old traditional media were like suns in the centre of the system suns that decided on the gravitation of most communication and information around them, Ramonet argues that today's media are more like space dust, with a strong capacity to agglutinate, or stick together, to make giant platforms of information in no time. The challenge now seems more to be finding out what the *media* are or where they are. How do we best trace, follow and interpret the developments? Just look at last weekend's North London riots, where Facebook certainly played a role as the first online gathering of people mourning the death of Tottenham resident Mark Duggan. However,

the most powerful and up-to-the-minute rallying appears to have taken place on a much more hidden social network: BlackBerry Messenger. BlackBerry is the smartphone of choice for the majority (37%) of British youth, and unlike Twitter or Facebook, many Blackberry messages are untraceable by the authorities, which is why, in large part, BlackBerry Messenger has come to play an important role in youth activism in some Middle Eastern countries, such as the Emirates.

The Arab Spring and Cute Cats

The series of uprisings in oppressive dictatorships in the Middle East and Northern Africa, and the role of social media in them, are central to the recent developments. As Clay Shirky reminds us, the use of social media tools such as text-messaging, e-mail, photo sharing, and social networking does not have a single preordained outcome (2011, 29). Shirky quotes his colleague Ethan Zuckerman, who says, "Don't underestimate the value of cute cats". Here he is referring to the fact that, as people use social media to exchange images of cute cats and the like, those media actually become politically harder to shut down.

> The government can't go around shutting down pop culture Web sites because they're potential sites of politicization. And yet they are potential sites of politicization. So, I think that the lesson there is that an environment in which the citizens of a country can talk to one another about anything they like, is actually a better environment for them talking about politics than specifically designing political forums which are easier to monitor and easier to shut down. (www.the-world.org/2011/01/the-political-power-of-social-media/)

There is clearly a need for more empirical research on the role of the Internet and social media as a potential tool of freedom of expression in different local settings, not least at this stage, in the wake of the Arab Spring. Social media were used for mobilization, organization and information on the political unrest, and together with more conventional media played a part in informing broader national and international publics about what was going on. However, we still know little about the role of both social media and other media in the 'revolutions' in North Africa and the Middle East. Traditional media should also be looked into. In Tunisia for instance, it is considered important to analyse the relatively new private radio and television stations, as well as Arab satellite media, in addition to the role of social media in the revolution. How mainstream media news feeds are influenced by information provided by social media environments is a central question that deserves further investigation, in relation to both the Arab Spring and other phenomena.

Simultaneously, a trend away from broad public arenas may be witnessed. Arguably, there has been a growth in 'echo-chamber' tendencies in online communities, where members of specific interest groups tend to use the Internet to exclude views that contradict their own beliefs and theories. Cass Sunstein warns against this development in his book entitled *Republic.com 2.0* (2007) and argues that it may lead to cyberbalkanization, where a wide range of publics only discuss issues internally and never with each other. Such a development may in the long run injure democracy, as different groups avoid contact with one another while gathering in increasingly segregated communities.

Since the era of the Enlightenment, tensions between different views have been seen as crucial to the continuous development of good sense and the enhancement of human intellectual powers, which in turns benefits the common good. What will happen to the affirmative effects of freedom of speech on the discovery of truth if only those who agree participate in the discussion? It seems obvious that in such closed constellations extreme views may more easily gain ground. Although it is still much too early to say anything certain about what led Behring Breivik to commit terrorist acts in Oslo a few weeks ago, the echo-chamber theory may be part of a possible explanation for how his extremist views grew unchallenged**.**

Another dimension here is that as we talk a lot about the Internet, we seldom ask who actually controls it, Today, in 2011, the Internet is a network of 36,500 networks. However, it is not obvious exactly how many networks and what different types of networks make up the Internet, and the Internet topology is changing due to the dynamics between dominant players. Who controls the deep structures of the Net and what does this imply for questions of freedom of expression?

Doing the Right Thing? Structure of Research Divisions and Groups

During the NordMedia conference this year, there have been discussions about the division system that was brought into being prior to the 2009 NordMedia conference in Karlstad. The previous working groups (24 of them in Helsinki 2007) were left for a new system of 12 specific divisions. The new division system has now been tested at two successive Nordic conferences, and it is about time to evaluate and reflect upon what came out of the changes. One aspect that seems clear is that the 'top-down' decision-making process concerning which groups or sub-fields should continue as divisions was dissatisfactory. Research groups will obviously be changing, growing, splitting up and even sometimes diminishing and closing down, but these processes should ideally happen as naturally as possible, based on the wishes of the members constituting each entity. One of the ideas behind the new structure was that the divisions should not be centred around a specific medium. However, as Film History, Fiction in Film and Television as well as the Visual Culture groups disappeared, many Nordic media researchers specializing in film feel they have lost their research network's history and the alliance they naturally belonged to, leaving them without an obvious new group in the Nordic conference structure. Hence, there would seem to be a need for the next conference in Oslo, in two years, to consider the creation of a new division that can accommodate Nordic researchers within the field of film/visual studies.

Another group that ceased to exist is the one that was entitled Feminist Media Policy in Helsinki 2007, and earlier often referred to as the Gender Group. Here there seem to be more diverging views on whether or not closing down this group was a good thing. Many would argue that in an ideal world gender should be included as a general perspective in much media and communication research and therefore should not constitute the focus of one particular research group. The question is whether the non-existence of the gender group leads to a situation where gender as a possible dimension disappears from our researcher 'radars'? In this NordMedia conference, we have seen some examples of stimulating gender research. At the same time, it is significant when Nordicom director Ulla Carlson, perhaps the person in the best position to judge the Nordic media research

scene, expresses her worries about the lack of focus on gender issues in current Nordic media research. We might wonder whether this is a result of a situation in which Nordic media research reflects the branch we are supposed to be studying. In an interview last year, one of the editors in the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) stated:

> We don't focus so much on gender anymore. The real and important challenge we face as a public broadcaster today is how to include the 'New multicultural Norway' in our news and general programming. (interview, editor NRK, June 2010).

Are we as media researchers only able to keep one thought in our minds at a time too? Inspiration from the 'intersectionality' field of research may be useful in analysing how social and cultural categories intertwine. The framework suggests that power structures of gender, ethnicity, political orientation, class, and the like, do not function independently, but must be understood together (see, e.g., Andersen and Hill Collins 1992/2007). Such a multifaceted approach makes it clear that it could be counterproductive to ignore the gender dimension, when for instance focusing on multicultural or political perspectives.

The diminishing focus on gender is paradoxical in light of the fact that there is still systematic exclusion of women in the media. Under-representation, insufficient media coverage, and the prevalence of stereotypical information are all cited as obstacles to equal enjoyment of freedom of expression (see, e.g,. La Rue et al. 2010). The Global Media Monitoring Project, the largest and longest longitudinal study on gender in the world's news media, in its study for 2009, concludes that women are grossly underrepresented in news coverage in contrast to men worldwide (see www.whomakesthenews. org). On one specific date, 10 November 2009, 1281 newspapers, television and radio stations as well as Internet news were monitored in 108 countries worldwide. The results indicate that on that day only 24% of news subjects, or rather people in the news, were female. Even in the Nordic countries, the gender differences remain highly significant in the news media. Thirty-one percent of voices in the news were female in Norway on this particular day. As persons interviewed or heard in the news, women remained stuck in the 'ordinary' people categories, in contrast to men who continued to dominate the 'expert' categories. Only 19% of the Norwegian expert sources were women.

If we are to encourage new and important perspectives, gender must be included as a dimension in media and communication research. The recent terrorist attacks in Oslo and on Utøya also spotlight questions related to the mediation of gender perspectives and ideals of masculinity in the Nordic welfare states. It appears that the terrorist was as much against female equality and female power as he was against his other main object of hate, namely multiculturalism. Scholars have shown how racist ideologies are almost exclusively misogynist and anti-feminist as well, hence it makes sense to include gender as a parameter when examining the acts of terrorism in Oslo/Utøya.

New Wine in Old Bottles or the Other Way Around?

As the world keeps spinning and new technology permeates all aspects of society, many old distinctions become problematic or just less relevant: the distinction between mass media and personal media as well as between media institutions and business organizations may be illustrating examples. Also the dichotomies between state and civic society,

between the global south and the global north, and between citizens and consumers have changed into more hybrid concepts.

The notion of the public sphere, which has traditionally been a core concept in studies of media in liberal societies, is an example of how a changing context generates a need to redefine concepts. The notion of 'public' often refers to the division between citizen and consumer. Within many theories, the 'public' is often seen as isolated from the commercial sphere, where viewers as consumers are addressed as individuals in the private sphere. At present, however, it might be useful to reconsider this dichotomy. The concept of a public has a normative status within media theories. Traditionally the concept has had a great deal to do with 'what is public', presupposing a deliberate audience coming together as a public. Dayan (2001) argues that whereas the concept of 'public' traditionally has positive connotations, the concept of 'audience' is constructed as its "dark doppelganger" and often turns out to be a "bad object" (2001, 746). According to Dayan, media publics are both sociable and performative; they are apprehensive to "strike some sort of a pose" as a public (2001, 744) and capable of translating their preferences into actions. His argument has not become less valuable since it was written a decade ago. The active public is largely what characterizes the situation today. As I have argued elsewhere, the citizen-versus-consumer dichotomy's implications for the definition and construction of the public itself, and the internal social hierarchies it conceals, often go unnoticed (Orgeret 2009). The dichotomy imposes a neutralizing logic on differential identity by establishing qualification for publicness as a matter of abstraction for private identity. Hierarchies of gender, class and ethnicity are also easily hidden in the shadows when the spotlight is exclusively on the citizen-versus-consumer dichotomy. While the consumer traditionally belonged to the market, and the citizen belonged to a collectivity defined by the principles of universalism and equity (Habermas 1989), the concepts have become increasingly intertwined. Hilmes (2007) argues that, contrary to the idea of traditional writings, 'public service for citizens' can suppress some forms of expression and marginalize some groups, whereas 'commercial media for consumers' can be politically and socially empowering under certain circumstances. Furthermore it is argued that new communicative dynamics lead to new critical thinking about public and private spheres, as well as the shifting linkages between them (Youngs 2009, 128). At the same time, new media must also be understood in light of media history. Old and new media are related to each other, feed into each other, and are inspired by each other's modes of expression.

Who Are We?

Interdisciplinarity has always been a characteristic of our field, and a broad range of theories are alive and working our field of media and communication studies. It is a double edged sword, as it may undermine the power of the field, but it can also open the door to fruitful multi-dimensional research. And to meet the increasing complexities of the field – of the world around us – we are certainly in need of some intersectional approaches. We must be able to maintain several lines of thought at the same time and combine different methodologies to obtain more nuanced descriptions and discussions of reality.

A couple of years ago, Lars Nyre, editor of the Norwegian Journal of Media Research (*Norsk Medietidsskrift*), wrote that "after 20 years we should now have finished the

discipline-creating debates about who we are as media researchers" (2009, 98). Today, it is my impression that we have come close to reaching that goal. While our field of media and communication studies some years ago was characterized by a division (and sometimes even overt quarrelling) between researchers from the humanities and researchers from the social sciences, that gap seems less important today. In fact our dual background in many ways has become our strength. For many of us, it is absolutely normal to live and practice in the borderland between the humanities and the social sciences. That space, which has been created by a wide range of traditions coming together, is exactly where we belong. The possibility of operating in this crossroads of quantitative and qualitative methods was what brought many of us to media studies in the first place. This is the double edge: What our field lacks in long and deep-rooted traditions, and perhaps sometimes in a clear focus, it gains in having a cross- and interdisciplinary soul.

At the same time, we must not ignore the danger of getting too self-absorbed and forgetting the broader, transnational perspectives. Parts of the world and groups of people are still systematically ignored by the media's structures of ownership and power. Universal concepts such as freedom of speech manifest themselves differently in various local settings. There is still a great deal to discover from transnational research projects, to learn from cooperation with media scholars working in different settings, also outside the Nordic countries, and from sharing and discussing. As Terhi Rantanen has shown, when we do comparative research, we understand that we need to compare a variety of media across borders, including minority and diasporic media, in order to do justice to their diversity within a particular nation-state and to see their similarities and differences inside and across national borders (2008, 39).

It has been argued that, in Norway, media studies appear to be very national**.** Trine Syvertsen (2010) refers to the University of Oslo's study of its ex-students (kandidatundersøkelsen 2008), and how journalism and media studies candidates (MA in 2005-2007) seem to be less concerned about international issues than are students in the social sciences and humanities. Syvertsen concludes that media studies in Norway appear to be very Norwegian. It may seem as though students who recently finished their MA in media studies are not particularly interested in 'the world out there' Syvertsen says (2010, 73), and that the studies rather emphasize than challenge this. However, if we take a closer look at the Master's theses recently written in the field of media and communication studies, also at the University of Oslo, and published through the DUO library system (www.duo.uio.no), we see a somewhat different picture. Of the 36 MA theses from 2010 published in DUO, 21 had a clear Norwegian focus, whereas 15 were international/comparative in nature. If we look at Nordicom's overview of Norwegian PhD theses from 2009, among the 18 registered, 11 have a clear Norwegian perspective, whereas 7 are internationally or more comparatively oriented.

And if we look at the papers presented at the NordMedia conference this year, national research and projects with an international profile coincide. Here again the point of view from which this is observed must be taken into consideration. My impression, that many Nordic media researchers are highly interested in international and transnational perspectives, is of course coloured by the fact that at this conference I have mostly been taking part in Division 5: Media, Globalization and Social Change. My departmental affiliation might also strengthen this impression, as the Department of Journalism and

Media Studies at Oslo and Akershus University College has a distinct international profile, with many researchers interested in the world 'out there'.

And finally, it is of course fully possible to be interested in the world out there and (at times) keep a closer, local or national research focus simultaneously. Many Nordic media researchers participate in international conferences, publish internationally, and share their findings with colleagues from a wide range of different cultures and countries. Furthermore, the world is increasingly 'coming to us' too, and several interesting current Nordic media research projects are looking at media and migration, new cultural complexities and diaspora media in the Nordic countries.

So – Are We doing the Right Thing?

The explosion of the media field implies that knowledge on media, mediation and symbolic power cannot be ignored, and we see that media and communication researchers have gained in power and in access to power structures during recent years.

Now we need to use that power well. Some of *your* research and knowledge have direct effects on new laws and political decisions in the Nordic countries. As members of diverse national and international commissions and committees, our somewhat diverse Nordic media research family is progressively playing a role in developing our societies, which has consequences for the future. But also in our own smaller research projects, we need to be aware of our potential and actual power. We need to reflect on what we find important and to dare to delve into difficult and challenging questions to make sure that some topics do not disappear from our societies' conscience.

We are definitely doing the right thing in meeting like this in a Nordic setting. This is in fact quite unique in an international context as well: Media researchers from five countries meeting every second year. Hence, the Nordic media research network is met with interest outside the Nordic countries, with more than 2000 subscribers to *Nordicom Review* in 140 countries worldwide. Our network provides a unique platform for exchange, comparison, self-reflection and interaction. I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Nordicom, for the essential job it does in supporting this network and documenting the research carried out within our field.

As media researchers, we are responsible for bringing informed arguments to the public debate about the media's role, not least because media and communication issues are topics that most people have an opinion on, without necessarily having the ability to base these opinions on good and reliable research findings. We must continue our work to provide research that can help those in power understand the pros and cons of specific scenarios. We make some crucial choices already at the stage of sketching new research projects, as what we focus on as researchers has the possibility to make an impact. Christina Kaindl's keynote speech here at the conference showed the challenge of connecting to some difficult issues, such as how the extreme right is able to gain by the fact that some experiences are poorly represented in the media, politics and civil society. The recent terror attacks in Norway may have actualized the need to problematize and articulate that which is unspoken. There are many questions just waiting for us to ask them. And certainly there is not *one* right thing to do, but scores of them. Let's do the right things!

References

Andersen, Margaret and Hill Collins, Patricia (1992/2007) *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology.* Wadsworth Publishing.

Dayan, Daniel (2001)'The Peculiar Public of Television', *Media, Culture and Society.* vol.23, no 6.

Habermas, J. (1989/1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* Cambridge, Polity Press.

Hilmes, Michele (2007) 'Front Line Family: Women's Culture Comes to the BBC', *Media, Culture and Society,* vol.29, no 1.

LaRue, F; Haraszti, M.; Botero, C. and Tlakula, F.P. (2010). *Tenth Anniversary Joint Declaration: Ten Key Challenges to Freedom of Expression in the next Decade* (www.article19.org/pdfs/standards/tenth-anniversary-joint-declaration-ten-key-challenges-to freedom-of-express.pdf)

Nyre, Lars (2009)'Leder: Medievitskap naturlegvis', *Norsk Medietidsskrift* Vol 16, no .2

Orgeret, Kristin Skare (2009) *Television News. The South African Post-Apartheid Experience.* Saarbrücken, VDM Verlag.

Ramonet, Ignacio (2011) *L'Explosion du journalisme. Des médias de masse à la masse des médias.* Paris, Galilée.

Rantanen, Terhi (2008) 'From International Communication to Global Media Studies. What Next?', *Nordicom Review*, 29(2).

Shirky, Clay (2011) 'The Political Power of Social Media. Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 90. no 1.

Sunstein, Cass (2007) *Republic.com 2.0.* Princeton University Press.

Syvertsen, Trine (2010) 'Medieviternes suksess', *Norsk medietidsskrift*, 17(1).

Youngs, Gillian (2009)'Blogging and Globalization: the Blurring of the Public/ Private Spheres'. Aslib Proceedings. *New Information Perspectives*. Vol. 61. no 2.

KRISTIN SKARE ORGERET, Dr.Art., Associate Professor at the Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Oslo University College, kristin.orgeret@hioa.no