

Media Societies Around the Baltic Sea

Cultures and Communications in Transition

JAN EKECRANTZ, TOM OLSSON (research directors),
STAFFAN ERICSON & PATRIK ÅKER

The roles of the mass media in times of social and cultural change is a moot issue in contemporary communications research. Not least the transitions of East Europe and the Baltic have triggered off a lot of critical reflection concerning the received models and concepts within the fields of media research and social transition theory. Thus, the transformation of Eastern Europe has hastened reassessments in international media research. Culture has come into focus generally in social theory for instance as a constitutive force in the modern world system, and in the last decade or so various constructionist perspectives have come to the foreground, implying that the media do more than reflect the world around them.

“Media Societies”

A number of interrelated themes can be derived from different interpretations of the expression “media societies”. *First*, it refers to the fact that the media as institutions and technologies are heavily implicated in modern societies. In that simple sense they are “media societies”. This calls for documentation and studies of the *media systems* as part of society’s infrastructure, and their economic, legal and professional bases. *Second*, the media constitute a society in a somewhat more restricted sense, but with a wide impact – as elite culture or subculture of specific professional and other groups. Thus, also journalistic and media production needs to be studied, including professional ideologies and self-perception, the elite experts and popular talk show hosts and other “media intellectuals” – their different roles, modes of public address and internal hier-

archies. *Third*, these media do themselves construct social, cultural and political worlds. Social and other realities are not only *represented* in the media, they are also *constructed* by the media. Society is mediated. Fourth, the texts and general activities of the media interact with other parts of society, leading to a society, an institutional order, affected by and to some degree *formed* by the media constructions (as, for instance, modern politics). These aspects call for documentation and studies of the media *output*, its contents and forms, in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

Communications and Cultures in Transition

It is reasonable to assume that the social and political changes in the Baltic and East European countries and the transnationalization of the media sphere to a certain extent are interdependent processes. Democracy movements relied on nationally and, not least, internationally televised events and, later, Western commercial systems and program output have had a strong direct and indirect impact in these countries. The media and the media contents are parts of historical realities and, on occasions, they also influenced the turn of events.

Due to recent reorientations the field has come to share research agendas with a mix of other (sub)fields, such as studies in political communication, cultural identity formation, aspects of modernity, popular culture, globalization theory, etc. The transformations in the last decade, of both Nordic and Post-Communist societies pose a challenge to the social sciences. The contexts of global communication problematize such central concepts as ‘modernity’ and ‘identity’ and the constitution of intellectual and cultural fields. Within media studies

one has studied society as 'imagined community', agenda-setting in the public spheres, the discursive construction of social problems, identities and relations, and many other problem areas where inter-disciplinary approaches are much in need in order to further the understanding of complex new realities.

Themes and Projects

The objective of the research programme concerns the role of the media, as political and cultural agents, in reflecting, impeding or contributing to social changes in the Baltic Sea region. The research objective is twofold: we are undertaking *comparative analyses* of the transformations of the public spheres and cultures in the countries involved, and studies of the roles of the media in processes of *intercultural communication* between the countries and regions, as it has developed historically.

The programme consists of *four major projects*, each one of them addressing one or more themes. The first two projects, (1) *Journalistic and Media Cultures* and (2) *Media Imagery*, deal with journalism as a national culture and the general approach is comparative. Because of language and market conditions journalism has traditionally been very strongly tied to the national political culture and the national frame remains the only viable one for most comparative research purposes. Within these two projects studies are made of the role of media intellectuals in the different countries, news of the Other, gender constructions and visualizations of the Other.

The broader field of media and communication studies is the frame for the two projects on communication and transitional timespaces: (3) *Cross-Border Communication* and (4) *Discourses of Transition*. A recent phenomenon is the diversification of media markets and audiences, implying that national borders are crossed not only by international or global media, but also by national and regional ones. One study will focus on TV as a transnational field, others on the construction and representation of transnational minorities. The fourth project represents contextualized discourse analyses, bringing together and broadening the scope of the other projects. The foci are on constructions of social problems and cultural identities in a global context and on narratives of change and difference, the tem-

poral and spatial parameters of transition and modernization.

Networks

The programme gathers researchers and network partners from different academic sites, but has, apart from SH, three centres: University of Tampere, The Swedish School of Social Science (SSKH) and its Research Institute (FISS) at the University of Helsinki, and the University of Tartu. The following researchers from these three universities took part in the planning of the programme:

University of Tampere: professor *Kaarle Nordsteng*, researcher *Juha Koivisto*, PhD-student *Jukka Pietiläinen* and associate professor *Risto Kunelius*.

University of Helsinki: professor *Ullamaija Kivikuru*, director *Tom Sandlund*, associate professor *Tom Moring* and professor *Charles Husband*, University of Bradford and international reader at the SSKH.

University of Tartu: Professor *Marju Lauristin*, senior researcher *Peeter Vihalemm* and associate professor *Epp Lauk*.

Estonian Institute of Humanities, Tallinn: Dr *Mikko Lagerspetz*,

We envisage extensive co-operation with existing and planned research projects in these locations. At this stage the plans of co-operation have materialised in two cases: In Tartu two research projects, *Construction of societal changes in Estonian media 1985-2000* (Lauristin and Vihalemm) and *Changes in journalistic culture during the post-Communist transition* (Lauk), are designed to match the Södertörn programme. There will also be direct cooperation and coordination with projects in Tampere and Helsinki.

Research projects

I Journalistic and Media Cultures (Tom Olsson)

Comparative subprojects combine to give a coherent picture of significant traits of modern media practices. These practices look different in different societies, and they develop in different directions because of variable societal conditions in the respective countries.

Media Intellectuals

(Tom Olsson)

Start: July 1998

The expression “media intellectuals” refers to a multi-dimensional phenomenon in the public sphere. Historically the media have been a vehicle for intellectuals, as well as offering them a set of roles and modes of expression. Today’s TV talk show hosts and the “chronicles” in dailies and magazines play a seminal role in the public sphere. The practices of the media intellectual are linked to the creation of a “persona”, a media “personality”. The star quality of media intellectuals suggests an approach which focuses on the *individuals* expressing cultural and societal criticism in the media, as well as on the *genres* where this criticism appears.

One aim is to explore the varieties of personae and genres in different media, another the interplay between different kinds of media intellectuals. More important is their role as interpreters of the *zeitgeist* and public sentiments, thereby tying the public to the media. They also form a society by themselves articulating different social and cultural interests (Vox Pop vs. Elite etc).

One study offers concrete examples of the textual performances of politics in the Swedish press between 1925 and 1995 (later to be supplemented by studies of other nations in the Baltic Sea area). This study depicts a recast of power among media intellectuals. In 1925 liberal editors made an attempt to carve out a niche for themselves as independent media intellectuals, but counter-discourses were clearly visible in the press, amongst them the journalism of the watcher, a critical urban observer. In the liberal version of the watcher the name of the game was detachment and irony, in the conservative version the name of the game was populist appeal. Today as the conservative and liberal versions have merged into one, the watcher has a dominant position, a *pundit* operating in a *media demimonde*.

Another study deals with the reactions to fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989. In such a moment of turmoil roles were changed in the media society and new stars entered the field challenging the old pundits and setting new agendas for the public talk.

II Media Imagery (Patrik Åker)

In common academic parlance, identity is said to be constituted through categories of similarity and difference. It is through the distinction between Us and Them and the relations between these two groups, that We not only define Them, we also identify who

We are. The construction of the Other is an important element in the mobilisation and sustenance of collective identities, however identity, be it personal, national or regional, is never static but constantly redefined and redefended in different historical periods. The aim of the project is to look at the construction of the Other. How are national and international notions of community represented through changing images of the Other? How are they Others and how are they like Us? What types of kinship and distancing mechanisms are invoked?

Studies will be made of the production, over time, of *mutual images* between the countries; these concern the dominant or mainstream news media (“social faction”), gender constructions and visualizations of the Other.

Social faction: News of the Other

(Kristina Riegert)

Start: April 1999

Political cultures and the journalistic construction of the Other are studied through the hegemonic, mutual images in the major news media, in historical and comparative perspectives. How are peoples and groups of other countries represented in the major news media of the respective countries? Among the issues studied will be the local uses of international news texts and video footage in news about the Baltic states, the representation of “we” vs. “them”, “nation” and “nationalism”, and territorial and non-territorial concepts of space and place.

Gender construction in representations of the Other

(Anna Roosvall)

Start: Feb. 1999

When people of another nationality are presented in the Swedish news discourse, they are normally representing the Other. However, there may be a difference in the degree of otherness, a difference that is not only a question of nationality, but also of gender (as the construction of masculinity and the male norm are built upon the exclusion of femininity/women as the Other). Thus: what happens to individuals and groups (in the media texts) when they are both of another nationality and of another sex? Is there a “double otherness” and how does it operate in media texts about the Other? What role do the media play in legitimating new gender ideologies (or reinforcing traditional ones)? In which public spheres are men and women represented, and how?

Visualizing the Other

(Patrik Åker)

Start: Jan. 1999

Different studies will focus on pictures of the countries around the Baltic Sea. After 1989 the raise of

national identities in these countries have to co-exist with the introduction of the concepts as “the European House” and the significance of the globalization process. Therefore it is not satisfactory to speak solely of looking at the Other in relation to national identities. The visualization of the Other can in another sense be seen as assumptions of specific European and global thoughts and values that are naturalized. This stresses the need to examine representations in different media and compare for example widespread western newsmagazines with local papers. It also raises questions about pictures as sources in the process of constructing history. What other pictures do different representations evoke and how can they be understood in relation to local, national, European, and global identities?

III Cross-Border Communication (Staffan Eriksson)

The project deals with different aspects of cross-national communication: the different functions of *transnationally oriented media*, such as commercial television in different national contexts, as well as the establishment of new, transnational communication structures, such as *Cross-border minority media* and the *Internet*.

TV as transnational field

(Staffan Ericson) **Start: July 1999**

From its moment of introduction, *television* has been organized within a national context, and regulated by an ideology of public responsibility. During the last 20 years, however, various technological and political changes have drastically altered the landscape of television; its regional boundaries, its modes of production, its generic patterns, the constitution of its audiences. Such changes also mean that new models for describing television become relevant.

One possibility – suggested by the breakdown of monopolies, the scattering of audiences, the clashes of strategies among producer’s competing for commercial gains and/or cultural legitimacy – would be to view the production of television more according to the general logic of *cultural fields*, as these have been described by Pierre Bourdieu: specific spaces of possible positions, structured by objective relations and distributions of capital (political, economical, cultural) between social agents (producers, audiences, legislators, critics, etc), and by hierarchies of genres (news, entertainment, etc) representing opposing values (ratings, quality, etc) imple-

menting the ideals of either “large scale” or “restricted” cultural production.

Ericson plans a study for the programme of the entrance and “trajectory” of a new actor within the Swedish field of television: *ZTV*. In its first five years of existence (roughly corresponding with the phase of deregulation for Swedish television), *ZTV*, represented a “position-taking” within the Swedish field, based on distinctions against already established forms of televisual production and qualities (differing from the positions of national public service as well as international, large-scale and commercial, media industries).

Beginning in 1998, *Z-TV* has also launched an attempt to establish production and transmission on location in *Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. A study of this process will not only provide an opportunity to study the strategies by which a fairly small, commercial television company today may expand in a new, international market. It may also demonstrate how cultural differences between two local contexts (Sweden and the Baltic states), and structural differences between two local “fields”, may influence such strategies and their success. The empirical comparisons of this case study may also be related to more general questions in television theory: if and how the model of cultural fields may be employed in transnational contexts, if and how television is to be conceptualized as a global/local form of communication.

IV Discourses of Transition (Jan Ekecrantz)

These studies are intended to pull several strings together in the larger research programme and relate the major issues to some contemporary research agendas, not explicitly present in the other projects, such as theories of globalization and modernization. The global (media) system bears upon postcommunist developments in two ways, at least. First, it played a role in the chain of events around 1989 – and for interpretations in the ‘international community’ of subsequent transformations. Second, the events of, and after, 1989 have produced cultural and ideological changes in the rest of the world. The studies under this heading thus attempt to trace cultural and political transformations in both Post-Soviet and Western societies, in particular as they relate to each other, due to the international media context.

The empirical focus is on discourses of transition in a range of public fora and on the interdiscursive relations that pertain between them, but the project

also draws on the other projects and their analyses of public textual systems, e.g. global, national and local news, both supporting and, at times, threatening structures of power in late modernity. Among issues to be highlighted are the international contexts of national and local public discourse, the penetration of “European” identity formation, narratives of change and difference, and the uses of history. In specific, this comparative study will try to assess the impact of globalization and europeanization on public or *elite discourses* in the various national contexts. What is at stake is, inter alia, a potential contradiction between, on the one hand, cultural diversity resulting from globalization, and, on the other, the need for identity-building resulting from the post-communist transformation and the national strivings for EU and Nato membership. How is this contradiction expressed in various national fora? This study will, basically, draw on materials collected within the larger research programme (editorials, feature materials, etc.) but also on other documentation, such as public records and reports. Included is Western research literature on Post-Soviet developments, with a focus on culture and media.

Further, a study will be made of *reportage and documentary* as counter-discourses, based on qualitative analyses of texts producing images of realities

across borders – which can be seen as the hallmark of the reportage genre as such, a genre in the social fiction/faction borderland. In these reportage analyses the focus is on strategies of concretization (metaphors etc.) and contextualization, the constructions of the cultural categories of time and space, chronotopes, the textualization/visualization of permanence and change, of cultural spaces, portrayals of majorities/minorities, and of the meeting of micro and macro worlds, typical of the reportage genre. In this context travel narratives and their documentation of contacts and interaction across borders and the Baltic Sea is a particularly interesting subgenre. The focus is also on forms which serve as alternatives and/or commentaries to the output of “mainstream” news.

* * *

In 1999 three introductory studies will be completed and (Finnish and Russian) materials collected for comparative purposes. The three studies concern global system and modernity theory, international research on Post-Soviet media, and Swedish and international reportage journalism on Russia 1989-1999.

