

# Ten Years in the Field

## *Past, Present and Future*

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1st August 1987, I assumed a position as Senior Lecturer at the newly formed Department of Mass Communication at the University of Bergen. I was the first representative of the humanities in the Department. In fact, I constituted a whole section, all by myself: the Humanities Section. With that, social scientific media research in Norway had formally acquired an institutional appendage which incorporated a token of the humanities tradition. One of the two whom Norwegian poet and Professor of Rhetoric Georg Johannesen some years earlier had called “misplaced sociologists” (the other was Helge Rønning) finally landed in the right pigeon-hole: sharing space under a roof with a bunch of political scientists and sociologists.

Today, ten years later, there is no longer a Humanities Section in our Department. There is no Social Science Section either, for that matter. The Department itself has been rechristened the Department of Media Studies, and what once was the flagship of the Humanities Section over the years, viz. the Master’s program entitled “Mass Communication and Cultural Mediation”, is being converted into a set of modules in a joint humanities-social sciences M.A. called Media Studies.

Whereas the Department was plagued by a series of conflicts the first five to six years, nowadays we coexist in peace and harmony. The same harmony seems to prevail in Oslo – which never had separate sections or M.A.’s to begin with. Now, how has this come about?

An anecdote from the Spring Conference of the Norwegian Communication Research Association

in 1986 is illustrative of the climate that prevailed roughly a decade ago. That meeting made a lasting impression on me.

There had been some discussion of forming a joint humanities and social science department of media studies at the University of Oslo, as well. The leader of the social sciences group had agreed to come only provided that the leader of the humanities did not. The latter did not attend, so the former did. The social scientist held a lecture on theory and methodology in media research. His main point was that media researchers were confronted with such a tremendous volume of texts, so that the strictures of time alone dictated the use of quantitative content analysis. I ventured the opinion that *both quantitative and so-called qualitative methods were needed*, that, surely, one’s choice of methods should depend on the nature of the question or problem at hand. I am still of that conviction, and I shan’t bother to elaborate my argument any further here. But in the discussion period following the lecture, I put the following question: “Suppose you were to select small samples of all the texts in newspapers, television and other media, and you had a certain amount of time at your disposal: might not other methods be acceptable?” The response was a short retort, which in its entirety went something like this: “If Gripsrud hasn’t yet discovered that time is a scant resource, then he is in for a big surprise. Otherwise, I hardly find the comment worth responding to.”

Now, all those present at that meeting have long since made peace and let bygones be bygones. But that was the prevailing tone in any number of fora

back then. It was a time of a great complex of power struggles and breaks with tradition. The latter were especially charged because so many levels were involved: theory and methods, even epistemological fundaments. They concerned the proper role and purpose of scholarship and scholarly inquiry as well as more general issues concerning the relation of science to broader ranges of intellectual activity – which in turn brought more general differences in orientation and personal disposition into play. Is research essentially like any other kind of office-work, or is it an integral and absolutely necessary aspect of our persons – like the work of a painter or sculptor, for example?

This was not a peculiarly Norwegian problem. It was part of a more general struggle which took place in the field worldwide a good part of the 1980s – a belated positivism struggle, if you like. As I noted in the introduction to my book, *The Dynasty Years: The ‘ferment in the field’* which surfaced around 1980 in journals like *Journal of Communication* was a symptom of the theoretical and methodological backwardness of social scientific media and communication research, relative to other social science disciplines and fields of study. Media research was for that reason accorded relatively low status among social scientists, despite general agreement concerning the importance of media, communication, and so forth in the so-called ‘information society’.

In countries like Great Britain and the USA the rebellion against simple positivism and empiricism was largely waged by social scientists, and especially sociologists. In Norway, Denmark and perhaps Sweden, the rebels were mainly ‘misplaced sociologists’ in the humanities, the kind who went in for studying the media. For it was they who were steeped in critical theory, which had experienced a revival in conjunction with the *Positivismusstreit*, ‘1968’ and all that it stands for; they were the ones who had pored over the classics of sociology and the epistemological debates, which mainly involved and concerned the social sciences.

Social science media researchers in our countries were, as late as the mid-1980s, still caught up in American-style mainstream Sociology and Political Science. Their familiarity with cultural and text-analytical areas was hardly comparable to the familiarity researchers in the humanities with the social sciences. Whereas many of us quickly developed a rudimentary competence in social science traditions and approaches to the media – enough, at least, to be able to teach basic survey courses on the subject – not a single established social science

media scholar bothered to learn the basics of text theory, cultural history, film analysis or the like. They went on studying and teaching about newspapers, radio and television – obviously motivated by an interest in these media’s content – but without the benefit of any theoretically founded analysis of how the texts in these media are structured or how the texts actually mean what they mean, what makes them entertaining, aesthetically appealing, exciting, relaxing or whatever.

This state of affairs changed only when younger social scientists picked up signals from the ‘ferment’ rumble in Great Britain and the USA and from the debate in humanities-influenced circles closer to home. These younger researchers – ‘thirty-somethings’ today – began to take an interest in *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere) theory, an interest their elders in the humanities had had since 1970. They started working with reception theory, which had been ‘hot stuff’ in Nordic literary analysis since the mid-1970s. They showed a greater interest in qualitative methods of studying society and social interaction than quantitative methods, something which was new to Nordic media research, but had long roots in the social sciences since their beginnings in the nineteenth century, and with vital inputs during the interwar period. Bitter battles and exceedingly long, defensive litanies in dissertations were needed for qualitative audience/reception studies to be accorded legitimacy in social science institutions. These young people subsequently were seconded by sociologically oriented scholars of a variety of ages. Thanks to their abiding interest in European sociological theory, these latter came to represent a link between the ‘old’ social science institutions and the newcomers from the humanities, i.e. the ‘misplaced sociologists’. A growing number of social scientists came to inhabit what, in my Department at least, was termed a ‘grey zone’ – a term which to Norwegian ears immediately brings to mind the vast sectors of the Barents Sea which Norway and the Soviet Union agreed to disagree about – a ‘zone’ which both regarded as territorial water, but which remained unbounded.

The ‘misplaced sociologists’ have always found themselves more or less in this grey zone. The humanities tradition in Scandinavian media research has been theoretically inclined, holistic and politically oriented from the outset. This, of course, is a function of its roots in critical theory and the re-reading of Marx which was epidemic in European universities in the years around 1970. A sociological reflection – directly inspired by, and in different respects kin with, the Frankfurt School as

a socially critical, interdisciplinary project – is the historical root out of which humanities-inspired media studies in Scandinavia spring. The work of the Frankfurt School spanned over Philosophy, Sociology, History, psychoanalysis, aesthetic studies and empirical studies of social conditions ranging from statistical inventories to ‘soft’ sociological methods. The thinking about what different knowledge-interests mean for research stems from the same source – Jürgen Habermas. And – as we all know – it was this same Habermas who produced the classic study of the structural transformation of *Öffentlichkeit*, a study which continues to inspire fundamental media and cultural criticism based in elementary democratic ideals.

The link to the Frankfurt School and, through it, to the broader sociological tradition is an important reason why so many Scandinavian media scholars from the humanities show such an interest in so many aspects of media research in the social science tradition and, even more so, continue to take active part in discussions of media and cultural policy. Most of us who came of age in the 1970s are political animals – by disposition, socialization or ingrained habit. Consequently, we thrive in the ‘grey zone’, which gradually has come to include most of contemporary Nordic media studies. But we should not lose sight of the fact that this seemingly so open ‘zone’ has its bounds and limitations.

While narrow-minded positivism has been marginalized in media studies today, social scientific approaches in a broader sense nonetheless dominate the field. They dominate, first, through the not necessarily explicit requirement, both at the graduate level and in the funding of post-graduate research, of relevance to current issues of media policy. Secondly, they dominate on a more fundamental level in prevailing ideas concerning the nature of media-scientific knowledge and the purpose of media research.

As for the policy orientation: It is fairly apparent to many of us that students of normal intelligence who are able to express themselves can do fairly well in introductory media studies courses, and even some more advanced level courses, simply by keeping abreast of what is in the newspapers and radio and television the months leading up to the exam. Of course, they will do even better if they are able to apply a few theoretical insights and specialized knowledge from the curriculum to the cases at hand. But the public discussion of the media, as reflected in the media, also cues them to what in the curriculum is important (and should be

studied) and what they can skim through with little or no risk of penalty: they should these days know something about public service broadcasting and policy relating to televised and video violence; they should be familiar with the ‘tabloidization’ and commercialization of news media. If they in addition are able to define and apply three concepts in a perfunctory, preferably oral, analysis of advertisements in glossy magazines, they may do quite well.

This orientation toward ‘current events’ and policy aspects has a parallel in media research. Nordic media research in the social sciences has always had such leanings. It has for the most part, to use Paul F. Lazarsfeld’s term, always had an ‘administrative’ character – rather than ‘critical’. The same is true of mainstream postwar social research in our countries. The tendency has become even more pronounced in the last 15-20 years, and it has spilled over into the humanities in two main ways.

The general politicization of the humanities in the 1970s has had an impact on project proposals and research designs, which, too, were politicized in varying degrees and respects. That is to say, a criterion of ‘policy relevance’ or ‘utility’ was often applied in the evaluation of individual projects and in the funding of institutions. But ‘policy relevance’ was defined generously in loose, theoretical terms and in an historical perspective. Consequently, neither studies of theoretical fundamentals nor historical studies were ruled out. This naturally had to do with the fact that the radical vogue which swept through Academia showed a strong interest in fundamental philosophical and theoretical issues.

In the 1980s, however, a number of research policy measures were introduced which smacked of a politically motivated desire to increase government influence over the universities and the rest of the research sector with a view to *bringing research more in line with policy objectives*. In both the humanities and the social sciences this has meant a favouring of *group projects* in research programmes of *topical relevance to current political issues and policy objectives*. Clearly, this can reduce the space available for different kinds of basic research and for inquiries in areas that seem more or less marginal in relation to the policy agenda of the day. Individual (non-programme related) studies in such ‘marginal’ areas, which lack a ‘momentum’ of their own, have meagre prospects in such a system.

This development has given Nordic media studies little cause for complaint. Especially since the field has acquired behavioural and cultural

components, topically oriented media research of the ‘grey zone’-type is almost perfectly attuned to these modern requirements. The media and communication revolution of recent years is of critical interest on many levels and in many sectors of society. In Norway and Denmark in any case, media research has done quite well for itself in competing for research funding since about 1990. It has been rather easy to demonstrate a basic congruence between our academic interests and the intentions set out in the terms of reference of various research programmes.

As everyone knows, fitting one’s project proposal into the overall theme of a given research programme is largely a question of rhetorical skill – of ‘creative writing’, if you will. If you are interested in basic rhetorical questions, you choose material and include a couple of research questions which have obvious relevance to current political discourse. When you really are interested in theories of modernization, you make sure you point out their importance to an understanding of urban development anno 1997 and the problem of integration or assimilation of non-European immigrants. But what do you do if you are interested in the concept of “unlimited semiosis”? How do you make the case for a study of the role of lighting in French films of the 1930s and 1940s? What arguments can you marshal to get funding for a study of certain romantic poets’ conceptions of the relation between rationality and emotion? I, for my part, have written enough research proposals in my time that I could probably offer my services as a consultant for colleagues with arcane interests like these, but inevitably, the necessary rhetoric will seem a bit forced now and again.

What I am asking, though, is whether these rhetorical acrobatics aren’t equally necessary within the field of media studies itself. Does the kind of social science hegemony reflected in the general orientation to the present and to policy priorities block some lines of inquiry, some themes in teaching? And if it does, is there anything we can do about it?

Now, please don’t think that I, ‘misplaced sociologist’ that I am, object to a political and contemporary orientation in research and teaching about the media. On the contrary, I firmly believe that we researchers and our students should be called upon to apply our expertise to focal issues in media and cultural policy at whatever level, as needed. A sober assessment is needed – in everyday life and in the public discourse – when unreflected ‘moral

panics’ and equally unreflected media ‘hype’ alternately dominate the public eye as the media and communication sector becomes ever more commercialized. I personally have spent a good part of this past year working with policy relating to public service broadcasting. No, the question I am trying to raise is this: does this orientation to the present and to policy displace other important and equally legitimate research foci – unnecessarily and with adverse effects?

The areas I am most concerned about are what we might call History, Philosophy and Aesthetics – that is to say, the key constitutive subjects of the humanities, which for that matter are also fundamental to any theory of society worthy of the name. By the same token, they are obviously fundamental to solidly founded media studies, as well. Nonetheless, I find them sadly underrepresented in our field of study, both our teaching (curricula, teaching and exams) and our research.

The lack is particularly acute with respect to aesthetics and the historical and philosophical aspects of such studies. In Norway, media studies fall under the heading of ‘aesthetic subjects’; the Norwegian social science and humanities research council, for example, groups it together with literature, dramatic arts and film. But the subject has a singular peculiarity compared to other aesthetic subjects: it lacks a list of ‘required readings’, a list of non-scholarly texts which students are expected to familiarize themselves with in addition to the theoretical and research-related literature we put before them.

At Bergen we do require our students to have seen three film classics and three television programmes; they are expected to have listened to one current radio programme and to have read two recent newspapers and two magazines. The films are ‘canonized’ classics. Otherwise, the material is more or less incidental and far from a comprehensive sampling. No documentary films or programmes are included, for example; likewise, no popular fiction, no pop music or lyrics. No dramatic texts from either stage, radio or visual media. Nor, for that matter, are computer and TV games or CD-ROM/hypertext represented.

Why is there no real sampler of media texts to match the amount of text-theory our students are exposed to? The first reason is that media studies embraces many different media. Among these only film has developed anything approaching a canon, a list of texts that are prerequisite to establishing cultural capital in the field. Newspapers, periodicals, radio and television are all decidedly ephemeral

media, whose texts have a life-span only somewhat longer than that of a fruit-fly. The texts in these media do not confer much in the way of cultural capital; they are not included in the 'cultural heritage' curriculum in our basic education. Consequently, university institutions which deal with the media lack the role institutions having to do with literature play, namely to update the contents of the 'cultural heritage' taught in school. Media education in the schools has no 'heritage' in mind; it is primarily conceived as a form of social-psychological prophylaxis – a way to keep our youth on the strait and narrow.

Aside from cinema, then, there is no established canon for media scholars to cultivate and keep up. But can we not establish canons in different fields where the rudiments of canon are beginning to emerge? After all, we have a history of popular music with Elvis and The Beatles and on down. We might easily extend it back in time to include blues and jazz. There is also a canon of popular literature, which – both nationally and internationally – may be extended back to around 1800. In the field of advertising there is a sort of 'hall of fame' of nationally and internationally renowned innovators – artists, photographers, copywriters and so forth. These 'criterion achievements' can form the basis of a chronicle of historically significant 'works'. Television has existed 40-50 years now, and we recognize 'peak achievements' in different genres and respect the work of certain journalists and writers. And what about photography – photojournalism, photographic art, commercial? Here, too, the ground for a canon has been prepared.

The question is, why haven't we followed through? Why don't we require ourselves and our students to be familiar with the various text traditions, which after all, in one respect or another, are predecessors to the texts we encounter in contemporary media. Even film canon is poorly represented. Why?

The reason, of course, is the hegemony the social sciences enjoy, which is expressed in an orientation toward what is current and toward policy issues – an orientation which many, including myself, find reasonable enough in many respects. It is easier to gain acceptance for 'theory' and 'methods' than for concrete familiarity with the historical material and analytical, interpretive praxis. As a consequence, our students are unsure of themselves when they are confronted with concrete texts, be it for analysis, interpretation or evaluation/review – for example, at the honours level. This is truly a shame inasmuch as they are

likely to be dealing with real texts after they leave school – as critics, teachers, journalists or as filmmakers and broadcasters.

Moreover, without contact with vintage texts, concepts like history and tradition tend to remain diffuse abstractions, with the result that thinking about various historical periods, too, becomes diffuse, and the risk of confusion and misunderstanding of the past increases. Theoretical concepts relating to texts also become abstract, and students' grasp of the relationships between theory and phenomena remains underdeveloped.

In some cases, we can almost say that students are made dumber by their studies – they lose touch with their own experience and practical common sense while at university, where they instead struggle with an array of diffuse abstractions, unrelated to their own media consumption and everyday lives. Only at the honours and doctoral levels is the balance righted, and in my opinion that is far too late. Too much of undergraduate studies, of teaching and advising remains on an elementary, introductory level. In the long term, I fear this may impede the development of theory in our field – and therewith the level of reflection.

These fears are not only a concern for us in Bergen or in Norway, for that matter. Nor are they a concern to us in the humanities alone. In their student years, many social scientists, too, have devoted time to subjects like literary criticism and art history, and use that knowledge – not least the artistic material in those subjects – in their research. Nor is the concern limited to our field; it is a problem within research in general, here in the Nordic countries and far afield.

It is not exactly easy to localize Nordic media research in the variegated landscape of 'schools' or 'traditions' which are maintained within the international research community. We northerners tend to be more eclectic and less occupied with labels and lines of demarcation. This, despite a manifest British influence.

I say "despite" because British media research of the past twenty years or so has been highly segregated into various 'schools'. There is something called the political economy tradition, which for a decade now has carried on a polemic with the school or tradition known as 'cultural studies'. The conflict between the two has interested me for several reasons. For one thing, I have been involved in cultural studies since my student days in the 1970s; secondly, at the same time, in the 1970s, I read *Das Kapital* and other works in the context of some-

thing known as the Critique of Political Economy. I did not perceive any antagonism between these two interests of mine then, nor do I now. But in media research today we find an enduring polemic between the two schools which have grown up around them.

The vehemence in the conflict is partly due to the fact that both have their roots in the Marxist radicalism of the 1970s. Reading the polemical discourse between them conjures echoes of the academic disputes over political theory of those ‘good old days’. Back then, one could taunt one’s opponents with claims like “We are marxier than you are.” – as Georg Johannesen put it. An ability ‘to marx’ – again Johannesen’s expression – was de rigueur. The battle-cry in the dispute in contemporary British media research is probably something more on the order of “We are more critical than you are”.

Roots in the 1970s are not the only thing the two schools have in common, however. They are also similar in that neither shows an interest in the arts or cultural expression in other respects than their ideological significance – as more or less false representations of reality or, possibly, as more or less useful to one or another cause or interest, be it “resistance”, “pleasure” or even “revolution”. One advantage of the “cultural studies” school is that they show at least some interest in how texts are put together, which is something the folks in political economy hardly ever do. This has been and remains a major fault in their research; if nothing else, their ideological sensitivity ought to have sparked some curiosity as to how – quite practically and precisely – media texts form and influence people’s ideological frames of reference and, in extension, contribute to the tenacity of bourgeois society.

This is but one example which leads me to conclude that our traditionally strongest source of inspiration outside the Nordic region may not have too much to offer us in the way of theoretical and methodological guidance just now. As I see it, our greatest need is a stronger orientation toward, and a better understanding of aesthetics and philosophical aspects. I shall be brief, but I shall try to explain why I think we need to think more in these directions.

When most people settle down to watch a film or a TV programme, to read a paper or a book, or to look at pictures or listen to music, what are they looking for, what do they hope to experience? They want to be touched in one way or another, and they are interested in what the text at hand tells them,

means to them, or does for them. That is to say, most people are oriented toward a particular text and its specific subject matter, its meaning, and the promise of pleasure it holds. They want to find out something they did not know before, they want to be amused or to experience beauty; they are hoping to get a new perspective on life or merely an escape from the drudgery of the daily ‘grind’. Most people perceive a major difference between reading Dostoevski and, say, Stephen King, or between, say, Kieslowski’s and Spielberg’s films. We also experience a difference between reading a serious newspaper and the items in a sensational tabloid. People in general *respect the individual text*. They have certain genre expectations and any number of factors which, a priori, affect their meeting with the individual text, but they *partake of and evaluate each particular text individually*: “That was a good film!” “That article really gave me a lot to think about.”

This has broader relevance than to reception studies alone.

A fundamentally *idiographic* approach to analyzing texts – i.e., a focus on the unique or particularly characteristic features of phenomena – is congruent with most readers’, viewers’, etc., approach. But in the field of media science an idiographic focus or interest tends to be regarded with suspicion. Even scholars with a background in the humanities now put forward views on media research to the effect that we should focus on texts solely as *elements* in social interaction, in broader social contexts, and that it is *these larger social contexts which are the ‘proper’ focus of our inquiry*. The tendency in media research today is, in other words, highly nomothetic, seeking to identify ‘laws’, regularities.

This emphasis on social regularities hardly affords a basis for *critical evaluation*, which might offer guidance to both producers of texts and their audiences. *For, both producers and audiences have an ‘idiographic’ orientation*. The failure to focus on the individual text and its particular features and qualities clearly renders us media scholars incapable of performing a significant service to society. Can we be content to produce students and researchers who cannot put forward well founded judgements as to what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ in media output? If not, we should make room – much more than we have to date – for theories of aesthetics and in-depth analysis of texts and their features. This also implies including the ‘meaning-less’ (the non meaning-laden) aspects of texts – from ‘dance numbers’ in musicals to the fascination of rhythms

in verbal, audiovisual and musical texts. To paraphrase Susan Sontag: Not only do we need a media-hermeneutics, we need a ‘media-erotics’, as well.

My second point concerns the need for historical and philosophical enrichment and reflection. It was not long ago that the social sciences were separated out from the humanities. In Bergen, Social Anthropology, for example, emerged from the Department of Philosophy as recently as the late 1960s. Partly for that reason perhaps, the collective memory of the social science disciplines is shorter than that in the humanities, where scholars are still mulling over insights of 2,500 years ago. A short memory entails the risk of our ‘discovering the wheel’ every ten years or so; it also implies a general superficiality of reflection. *Ad fontes!* – To the source! – is wise advice. It prevents innumerable misunderstandings. Let me give one example.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work has become exceedingly popular in many circles in recent years. His famous distinction between “barbaric” and “pure” taste is cited in a wide range of scientific articles – and with good reason. But the distinction is explicitly based on the theory of aesthetics Immanuel Kant set out in his Critique of Judgment. How many of us have read this source work? The same Immanuel Kant also wrote an elegant piece entitled *Was ist Aufklärung?*, “What Is Enlightenment?”. How many media scholars have read this work before setting out to evaluate the ideal of popular enlightenment and public service broadcasting, or to take stock of the current state of the public sphere, *Öffentlichkeit*, in the light of the postmodern critique of the enlightenment project? Very few, I should say. We leave such things to other disciplines – to philosophers, students of literature and the more intellectually inclined among sociologists and political scientists. Doing so, we class Media Studies as a plebeian branch of science – an applied science, dependent on others for answers to the fundamental questions.

The far too general ignorance of aesthetics and philosophical fundamentals in our field explains in large part how Bourdieu in the Nordic countries, the USA and Great Britain could be presented and perceived as a populist. Such a perception makes it difficult indeed to grasp how in recent years he has emerged as a champion of the autonomy of the arts,

of serious public discourse, and of knowledge as the Public Good. Had we read our Kant, it might not have come as such a surprise.

To sum up. Ten years have passed since I officially and formally assumed a permanent position in media research, and very exciting years they have been. Looking back, we can see that many major, positive advances have been made and a vast number of findings have been reported. But precisely because of this rapid pace of development, it is high time we paused and took stock, to see if we possibly have neglected anything along the way. And here we have to ask some very basic questions.

It often happens that I regard myself as a ‘misplaced sociologist’ in humanities contexts. On the other hand, I also sometimes feel like a ‘misplaced aestheticist with an interest in history and philosophy’ in media studies contexts. I feel these latter subject areas have a lot to offer both social scientists and humanities media scholars, whether of nomothetic or idiographic orientation. Due to its highly interdisciplinary character, our field can be a laboratory for both epistemological and more operational, practical research exercises. No one can do everything; specialists on a variety of subjects, theories, and methodologies are absolutely necessary. But neither can we hope for our field to thrive and develop if we in some kind of misdirected spirit of liberalism see ‘peaceful coexistence’ as a goal in itself – like the old hippie motto, “You do your thing; I do mine”. As the nineteenth-century Norwegian author and poet Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson once observed, “The best of all things is not peace, but rather the will to accomplish something.” By which I mean to say: we should count on further confrontations, and we will make no progress at all unless we acknowledge our contradictions and differences.

For ten years now, the ‘misplaced sociologists’ have been able to give their sociological inclinations free rein, and this freedom has helped keep the peace in our little world. A good number of our friends and colleagues in the social sciences, as well as sociologized colleagues in the humanities should in the next decade or so be able to join us in examining the web of historical, philosophical and aesthetic threads that link us together.

