

The Challenges of Media History

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The Nordic peoples, creators of ancient sagas, are fond of history – and also of media history. A number of recently completed research projects have appeared in the shape of multi-volume studies of media history, projects which in other countries probably would have ended up being published as monographs. It is not easy to explain this particular Nordic love for large-scale series. Maybe it has something to do with the size of these countries – maybe small nations harbour favourable conditions for overview and transparency, leading them to prefer grand, national synthetics rather than single-volumed studies.

Or what do you get out of the following facts:

The Finns have just put out nothing less than a 10 volume history of the Finnish press, while the standard history of the British press covers a modest two volumes (Koss 1981/84). In addition, the history of Finnish broadcasting covers three volumes plus an additional volume in English. The recent Danish Media History adds up to three handsomely produced volumes. A Swedish press history is out just now, with two out of altogether four volumes in print. Very delicious, very large scale. To be completed in a couple of months is a fifteen or so volume series of studies covering the history of Swedish broadcasting. Indeed, within a remarkable short span of years, “media history” has definitely made itself felt as a heavy contribution to media studies in this part of the world.

And this seems to go on, as I can demonstrate through a short glance at the situation in Norway. A three-volume history of Norwegian broadcasting was completed two years ago. A projected 4-volume history of the Norwegian press is scheduled to be launched in 2010; preparations are just now being made within a planning committee. And a two volume history of cultural & media politics has just been commissioned, to be completed as a collective research project at the Institute of media & communication in Oslo.

The love of history in the Nordic countries is all the more remarkable as the sheer concept of “media history” is a fairly recent one. When the Nordic media research conferences started to convene in the 1970s, there was no such thing as “media history”, in fact the term itself was not yet coined. A study group of that name came into being in the late 1980s. Today, the Media History Conference Group is the largest one in work, encompassing none less than 21 research papers.

We may wonder a bit about this, as the turn to history has occurred at a time when the media situation in general has changed deeply. Indeed, as all these huge volumes have

been written, the media scenery has transformed almost beyond recognition. The computer/network media, the mobile phone phenomenon, the growth of games and of “palm” media – all these are introducing completely novel issues into media studies. The two plenary lectures we have enjoyed listening to at this conference, the one on new media by Kirsten Drotner and the other about “new media, new generations” by Ellen Wartella, could simply not have been delivered only ten years ago. What catches our imaginations today are totally novel issues as seen from the horizon of the 1970s and even the 1980s.

You may understand what this leads up to: We do not escape the awkward question of whether all those history volumes of which we are so proud, may have been more or less in vain – provided we regard them as volumes of living research, addressing the whole breath of media sciences and relevant to us all. Maintaining such ambitions – would we not suspect that the large-scale studies of the past have been a bit overrun by media history itself?

You will expect that I for one, as responsible for some of these volumes, would hesitate in front of such a statement. Indeed I do. To the best of my judgement, there is such an amount of valuable empirical research laid down in these volumes that compared to the situation twenty years ago we have attained a higher level of knowledge and even of research culture. Still, media researchers in the field of history have got to ask themselves the same question as all other working in the field must encounter due to the changing media situation: whence to we go from here? Indeed, what will be expected from the media historian in the future?

We – the media history researchers – have received a couple of suggested guidelines from the panel here this morning. We have been advised to turn to a more comparative approach in our studies, leaving the narrow, national perspective of our studies aside in favour of cross-national investigations. We have also been asked to take up studies in the aesthetic and symbolic field of media, and to indulge in true global perspectives rather than geographically defined ones. Then we have been confronted with the suggestion from Klaus Brun Jensen to move into communication rather than into media studies.

I am personally in favour of most of these suggestions. Indeed, I think they are inevitable in the sense that media research in general – all research that is – will move on in these directions. The reason is that such ideas as those presented here at the panel are in profound accordance with the way we are today, the way we think about the media in the present situation. The questions we pose to history, I need not remind you, will of course always be those suggested by the present.

That our future studies of history should be more comparative than national, goes without saying, if only for the reason that with the present volumes there on the table, a level is now reached from where we can proceed less narrowly, more openly. The quest for comparative research follows so to say from the tendency of the media themselves towards national transgressions. We would all be in favour of – say – a joint Nordic history of media adaptation: a cross-country study of how the various media companies have taken up and adapted international formats & programme solutions to their own audiences. A comparative study of integrated high & low cultural history would also be of considerable interest. Even a Nordic comparative version of the parameters set forth by John D. Peters in his extremely imaginative history of the idea of communication (Peters 1999), would be welcome.

The next suggestion, that we divert our interest toward the aesthetic and symbolic representations of the media, is perhaps an idea with a more subtle implication. I take the accompanying criticism which has been voiced here against “the narrow institutional approach” to mean that we historians should turn to what we once used to all the media

content and its formal sides, rather than stick to the more institutional approach which we have been following in those volumes of history so far. And indeed we will. In fact, we have already started doing so, as we are all part of the general “rhetoric turn” and the equally general and inevitable “linguistic turn” which have swept though the humanities all over the world. For this reason you will find that more recent volumes of media history are pursuing aesthetic elements of history more energetically than former studies. I can testify to this with my own work of broadcasting history, which certainly have been object of this general turn. An additional reason that future studies in history will be less institutional, more aesthetic, is the fact that media institutions generally seem to have lost in importance during the last 30 years. There are no such powerful entities as telecom monopolies or broadcasting monopolies around; there is extended competing and increasing decentralising all though the media field. Our objects of study, formerly dominated by large colosses, find themselves nowadays transformed to combinations of larger firms and tiny, highly potential dwarfs.

And then we will go global – certainly we will. In fact we are in tune already. May I direct your attention to the Conference Group of news dissemination, headed by Jan Ekekrantz. In this group, two papers about the history of news are devoted to “globalisation in news presentations” and in “cross national diffusion of journalistic norms” respectively. Let that be sufficient to show that in these days of globalisation, media research as well as the more specific media history is ready to take its share.

And now to the suggestion that we should devout ourselves to “communications” rather than to “the media”. In a sense I agree, to the extent that we all have undergone a certain “communicative” turn during the last years. Allow me to bear witness myself. When I wrote that part of the Norwegian broadcasting history which covers the 1950s during the summer 1998, I particularly enjoyed working with the history of children’s programmes, as those programmes in the 1950s developed a highly sophisticated level of what we today understand as interactive programming. It was impossible to write this without taking my own grandchildren playing with their Nintendos that summer into account. One could hardly avoid being captured by their intense eagerness, comparing that to one’s own engagement with the “uncles” and “aunts” of the radio studio fifty years back. Communication matters more than before, indeed it does. So of course does the growth of the network media, and the present new interest in the history of the telephone as a precursor of the Internet – it is the same net, actually, which binds these two media together.

But should “media history” therefore be transformed to “communication history”? I doubt. To me, the object of our scientific interest should be the media as institutions. Not institutions defined as companies and firms, certainly, but as social institutions – arenas where roles and modes of activities develop through the mechanism of repetition into growing professionalism. Communication itself is a much less substantial, much more elusive object of study, according to my experience. Consider one particularly impressive but also rather futile contribution to media history through the “communication” approach: Twenty years ago the venerable sages of our science Harold Lasswell, Daniel Lerner and Hans Speier published an extensive collection of studies covering no less a theme than Propaganda and communication in world history (Lasswell et al. 1980). The three volumes obviously aim at a refinement of the communication approach, as media issues and media institutions are left out more or less completely, so as to sharpen the focus on (mainly political) messages throughout the ages. I do not think that such a publication, indeed such an approach, pays tribute to the idea that communication itself is worth studying – that is, studying within one, theoretically unified scope. Indeed these

volumes bear witness of the opposite, as I have argued elsewhere (Dahl 1994:558f.). For this reason I think we should still stick to the study of media as a cultural form *sui generis*.

References

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