

# The Logic and Practice of Writing Journalism History

## *Some Thoughts on the Future of Research on Media History*

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“Does Media History have a future?” Two Norwegian media researchers posed the question in a monograph from the Norwegian Association of Media Researchers over a decade ago (Myrstad & Rasmussen 1990:1). In the ensuing years it turned out that historical research on the media most definitely did have a future, not least in the Nordic countries. Major programmes of historical research have since been launched and completed in Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and Media History workshops continue to draw large numbers of participants at Nordic media research conferences.

The question today is how to proceed. What next steps should we take in the decade to come?

Any attempts to answer this question should start with a critical evaluation of the research done to date, particularly the research done within the framework of the above-mentioned programmes. The present article represents an attempt at such a critical – and self-critical – perspective on the area, but also an attempt to pinpoint some possible areas for future historical inquiry. In doing so I wish to ally myself with those scholars who emphasize the need, not just to write the history of one or another media corporation or personage, but to analyze media and journalism in the context of the broader process of communication in society. I also think that it would be fruitful to join the research tradition that is commonly described as “a social history of the media” and, from that platform, to develop an institutional and comparative perspective on the history of media and journalism.

I take my starting point in reflections on the Swedish research programme on the history of broadcasting that started in 1990 and was completed in the Fall of 2001. About twenty researchers were involved in the programme, which has produced seventeen volumes. My own experience relates primarily to the project entitled, “Broadcast Media and Society”, for which Professor Lennart Weibull and I were jointly responsible.<sup>1</sup>

## Studying Journalism as a Social Institution

There are many ways to go about writing media history. The most common approach, in the Nordic countries as elsewhere, is to trace the histories of media organizations, whether individual newspapers or radio and television companies. This approach is often referred to as “institutional histories” (Bondebjerg 2002; see also Weibull 1997, Dahl 1994, Høyer 1990). But “institutional histories” is a bit of a misnomer in that it implies that an institution is synonymous with an organization. This conception of ‘institution’ is, to my way of thinking, too narrow.<sup>2</sup> In modern institutional theory institutions are often conceived of as sets of norms and practices (patterns of social behaviour) that cut across the organizations in a given social field. They have an extent in both time and space, and one may expect the members of the organizations that maintain an institution to perform certain specific tasks or to satisfy specific needs in society.

In the project, “Broadcast Media and Society” we chose to analyze news journalism as a social institution in this broader sense of the word. Thus, it was important to maintain a distinction between broadcasting organizations and the institution of broadcasting and instead attempt to write a “social history of the media”.

The research approach that produces “social histories of the media” is far from homogeneous, however. Michael Schudson’s seminal book, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (1978) and Scannell and Cardiff’s *A Social History of British Broadcasting* (1991) are both important, but also very different with respect to approach and perspective. None of these writers has discussed his theoretical premises at any length; they remain implicit. In Schudson’s case only a few lines in the entire book:

Where standard histories of the American press consider the social context of journalism only in passing, this work takes as its main subject the relationship between the institutionalization of modern journalism and general currents in economic, political, social and cultural life (10-11).

Nor do Scannell and Cardiff elaborate particularly much, noting only in their introduction:

[A]lthough this book is all about the BBC it is not a history of the British Broadcasting Corporation. ... It ... attempts to account for the impact and effect of broadcasting on modern life in Britain. There are two parts to this project: the first is to describe the actual ways in which broadcasting developed and interacted with the society it was intended to serve; the second is to reflect on those accounts and their wider political, social and cultural implications.

A theoretical starting point that appears to be common among studies of this kind is that they view media and journalism as social *institutions* that both mould and are moulded by the society of which they are a part. Whatever the case, the above-cited works share this view. Thus, writing “a social history of the media” means abandoning the traditional focus on the history of media organizations in favour of analyzing the media and journalism in a broader institutional perspective. The media are upheld by specific, enduring norms and practices that are reproduced within and among different media organizations. These norms and practices are reflected in the expectations and demands on the organizations on the part of actors outside the organizations and the public at large. It is on these norms and practices that the focus of our project, “Broadcast Media and Society”, rests. They also form the basis of the periodization of Swedish journalism we arrived at.

Historians of the media – be they historians proper, scholars in other branches of the Humanities, or social scientists – commonly structure their material chronologically, dividing it into periods. The bases for the periodization vary widely, not only between researchers, but even within one and the same historical narrative. Sometimes, periods are defined with reference to organizational factors, in other cases according to changes in the surrounding political ‘climate’ or different journalistic practices, etc. In many cases, periodization seems to be primarily a narratological strategy intended to help readers grasp the whole so as to better comprehend its parts. As a consequence, the periodizations are not always systematic or well-founded in theory (Høyer 1998).

If we adopt an institutional perspective, however, periodization is necessarily more than a narratological tool. It becomes an analytical tool that helps us to interpret historical processes. Unlike researchers in the Humanities, who often focus on the distinguishing characteristics of a given period or event, social scientists commonly seek to identify the fundamental motor forces behind long-term social change. Unfortunately, many such histories are imbued with a presumption – implicit or explicit – of “progress” in one or another direction, i.e., they see epochs as representing stages of development in a “natural” (unquestioned) progression toward a higher and better order.

One of the principal conclusions we reached in our project is that it is virtually impossible to speak of trends or “stages” in the history of journalism. We found it more fruitful to discuss various periods that are defined according to the posture journalists assume vis-à-vis the public, on the one hand, and other social institutions, on the other. Thus, the bases for periodization in the study of Swedish broadcast journalism are the dominant characteristics of the logic and practice of journalism. We have identified and characterized four main periods in the history of news journalism in Sweden:

- Enlightenment<sup>3</sup> 1925-1945
- Mirroring 1945-1965
- Scrutiny 1965-1985
- Interpretation 1985-

We have chosen to label the first period in the history of radio, 1925-1945, *Enlightenment*. Radio at this time was very definitely in the service of public authorities. Radio journalism explicitly sought to influence its listeners. The notion of “betterment” was fundamental and pervasive: by listening, the public would become more knowledgeable and well-versed. Radio, however, actively avoided taking part in discussions of politics. The closest to politics that radio came in this period was to define what was “Swedish” and to defend democracy and Swedish institutions. Thus, the task was dual: to disseminate culture and knowledge, and to impart notices from official sources and what, years later, would be known as “pro-social” information.

During the second period, 1945-1965, which we label *Mirroring*, the posture of journalism vis-à-vis listeners and society gradually changed. What emerged was a greater orientation toward the audience; programming should to a greater extent cater for public tastes and interests. The shift meant that Swedish radio gradually abandoned its earlier paternalism and allegiance to authorities, and programming more and more sought to strike a balance between listeners’ interests and the public good. The ideal of mirroring – to reflect phenomena and events in an objective manner – that news journalists adopted in this period was actually a strategy on the part of radio to neutralize conflicts. All points of view should be represented, and all facets of a problem brought to light. But journal-

ism continued to operate within an established democratic consensus, the community of values shared by all concerned. The norms for good journalism in this period led to the suppression of hostile and provocative viewpoints.

In the ensuing period, *Scrutiny* (1965-1985), ‘good journalism’ was no longer based on consensus. A radical turnabout occurred, both in the manner in which journalists related to their audiences and in their posture vis-à-vis dominant social institutions. Once again, the ideal of active influence, toward the public and society alike, came to the fore. The task of journalism took a turn toward social criticism: on the one hand, radio and television should help bridge knowledge gaps and encourage people to take active part in politics, on the other, journalists should critically scrutinize holders of power and cast light on the shortcomings and injustices in society. New genres offered platforms for new, confrontative and polarized forms of journalism. News desks gave priority to significance and ‘depth’ rather than eye-witness coverage; the consensus perspective on society was replaced with a conflict perspective.

In the fourth and present period, *Interpretation* (1985 – ), we note a change in how broadcast journalism relates to audiences. The orientation to the audience has increased. The task of journalism is now to interpret reality for viewers and listeners and to serve as their agent vis-à-vis holders of power. The ideal of active influence on viewers and listeners has receded: instead, journalism has tried to adapt to public tastes. We note increased popularization, with an emphasis on news that has bearing on viewers’ and listeners’ everyday lives, and on sensational aspects. Newscasts are now accessible around the clock on multiple channels, and both audiences and programme output are split up among a growing number of channels, genres and programmes. Genres are blending; new genres like ‘docu-dramas’ and ‘reality soaps’ even blur the fundamental distinction between fact and fiction.

### **The Reproduction and Processes of Change in Media Institutions**

If there are no given stages and directions of development in the history of journalism, how are we to explain why journalism changes?<sup>4</sup> Our starting point in the project was the conviction that an institutional perspective on media history is vital if we are to understand how and why journalism is the way it is, how it reproduces itself, and how it changes over time.

The institution of journalism both moulds and is moulded by the society in which it operates. The relationship between journalism and society is actually many different relationships – to the general public as well as to other social institutions. Unfortunately, audiences have not been given very much attention in Swedish media histories to date. In our project, we considered it important to include the reception of journalism, both to gain a better understanding of the importance of journalism in society and to gain insights as to how conceptions of the audience mould the journalistic institution. We were not able to include all the relevant aspects of the relationship between journalism and its audiences, but we have tried in a systematic fashion to describe how audiences, on a collective level, react to programme output and how they view and listen to programmes. Also, the audience was the explicit focus of a study by Birgitta Höijer, who in the report, “We all tuned in” [*Det hörde vi allihop*] (1998), probed audience perceptions of radio and television in the 1900s. The audiences of journalism are, however, one of the areas that should be given more attention in future historical studies of broadcasting.

Often, the features of the surrounding society that are assumed to mould the media system and its institutions are referred to as the “context”. Everyone agrees that the context is crucial to an understanding of changes in the media, but exactly what the context consists of and how it should be studied? There the agreement ends. Scholars who have focused on societal forces and their impacts on broadcast media have tended to concentrate on the media’s relations to the powers of state and to political institutions. It is, however, important to broaden the focus to include how other powerful institutions – e.g., the so-called popular movements (trade unions, adult education associations, temperance unions, etc.), other media, and private enterprise – have influenced journalism. Not least the latter. For example, the Swedish broadcasting monopoly was able to prevail more than a half century thanks to an alliance in support of public service broadcasting that united such diverse partners as the broadcasting organization, Sveriges Radio, a bourgeois-dominated newspaper industry, and the labour movement. Thus, institutions that normally had little in common were joined by a common opposition to the introduction of commercially financed television.

We took our point of departure in the assumption that journalism is moulded both by internal, organizational factors and external, social influences. That is to say, it is moulded by circumstances outside the programme companies (e.g., the climate of opinion, political and economic conditions, media technology) and factors and relationships within the organizations (staff, chains of command, and so forth).

As noted above, we defined the different periods of Swedish broadcast journalism according to the norms and ideals of journalistic practice that prevailed at the time. As a result, there is a risk that the periods will be static inasmuch as the method emphasizes the dominant ideology, not the forces that militate for change. But as is particularly evident in the history of broadcasting, there has never been total consensus concerning the logic of journalism, either within the broadcasting organizations or in society as a whole. On the contrary, there has almost always been some measure of controversy surrounding what radio and television journalists should and should not do, concerning what constitutes “good journalism”, and the qualifications required to call oneself a journalist. There are always some principles (logics) and practices that are dominant, but they are never universally accepted. Dominance elicits resistance, even in journalism. Resistance gives rise to conflicts, which result in change.

An institutional perspective on journalism is well suited to analyze how institutions arise, are maintained and change as a consequence of, among other things, conflicts. Høyer (1998) advises analysts to “take the fault-lines of conflict into account, between media and other social institutions and between groups within media” as forces for change. We in our project identified five phases of change in Swedish broadcasting history, each characterized by a particular pattern of conflict.

- Centralization      1920-1937
- Emancipation      1937-1955
- Professionalization 1955-1977
- Decentralization    1977-1987
- Commercialization 1987-

In the centralization phase (1920-1937), an ongoing conflict between local and central was very important. Radio had started as a local medium, only a couple of decades later

it had become totally centralized. The prevailing ideology of the time presumed that technological advances would be used to create a modern society. Use of broadcasting in the modernization process presumed centralized management, i.e., on a national basis. Modernization was also centred around the nation's centre, the modern metropole. Consequently, many sectors of society experienced centralization and nationalization, radio among them.

The emancipation phase (1937-1955) saw a process whereby radio as an institution gradually freed itself from the requirement of always serving the public sector. The first step toward emancipation was taken with a growing awareness that radio was a medium with unique powers and potential. Radio in early days was seen more as a megaphone that made it possible for messages and lectures to reach out to many more people than could ever assemble in an auditorium. Technological progress – especially recording technology – made it possible to free programming from the confines of time and place. Radio could now be more “radio-like” and develop its own discourses. The second step concerned the relationship between radio and the press. The first decade, up to the mid-1930s, the publicly owned radio company was managed by the managers of the Swedish Central News Agency (TT), which was collectively owned by the press. At this juncture, the radio company (AB Radiotjänst) acquired a management of its own.

Whereas the emancipation phase refers to a change in the relationship of the radio company to the powers of state, the professionalization phase (1955-1977) refers to a demand for greater autonomy on the part of programme producers. Significance successively supplanted suitability as a criterion for programme content. Professional news criteria came to be equated with independent, critical scrutiny. Gradually, radio and television emerged as independent social forces. Meanwhile, their claims to power provoked a reaction. Several of the conflicts within Swedish public broadcasting, Sveriges Radio<sup>5</sup>, in the 1970s and 1980s were symptoms of a power struggle in which those outside the arena of professional journalism protested against the dominance of the logic of journalism and the power structure in the company. Women protested against male-dominated conflict-oriented journalism and a masculine editorial culture; branch offices in the provinces complained of centralization and a preoccupation with news and other content that originated in the capital, Stockholm. The critiques activated media policy-makers in the Cabinet and Parliament. Politicians saw a link between the centralization of radio and television and journalists' claims to power. As a consequence, Parliament voted to decentralize the companies, which marked the start of the decentralization phase (1977-1987).

During the commercialization phase (1987 -), in which we find ourselves today, the play of political forces around public service broadcasting subsided somewhat; instead, a new issue took the stage: the question of what role the public service companies should play in relation to the new, competing, commercially financed radio and television channels. The prime factor for change was the advent of commercial television, distributed via satellite and cable in the late 1980s. Journalistic norms and the journalists' role have changed in response to an increasing differentiation of the media landscape. Different “journalisms”, adapted to different market segments, have emerged: the homogeneous conception of journalism that had prevailed during the professionalization phase has grown increasingly heterogeneous. The conflict and debate about what constitutes ‘good journalism’ and the question of journalistic credentials has sharpened.

## Comparative Media History

Interest in journalism as a social institution implies an assumption that journalistic practices and logics are enduring. The institution of journalism undergoes change, sometimes rapid, sometimes slow, but it does not live a life of its own, in isolation from the rest of society. Instead, it evolves in interaction, both positive and negative, with other social institutions. To examine how different institutional conditions and relationships give rise to different kinds of journalism and how the institution of journalism in turn contributes to reproduce or change other social institutions – politics, private enterprise, organizations in civil society – is, in my opinion, one of the most important tasks before media historians today. In undertaking this task, it would be fruitful, I think, to start with and further develop the theoretical foundations of the broader institutional perspective on media history, and not least journalism history. One possible course might be to establish links with the very productive international research in the area of institutional theory. The relationships between organizations and institutions (norms and practices) and institutional change are frequently in focus in this area, which analyzes how institutions are moulded, reproduced and changed, asking what factors are necessary and/or sufficient to bring about change. Research in the area often takes a comparative approach.

In future historiographic projects on the media I think it will be necessary to consider national developments in an international perspective. The research to date has tended to explain changes in the media in terms of individuals' enterprising genius or editorial courage, internal administrative policies and decisions and, less frequently, as reactions to social changes on the national level. But, as we all know, the media sector is becoming increasingly international, not to say global.

Programme genres and concepts spread like wildfire from country to country, and the changes noted in domestic journalism generally have their counterparts on several continents. Within the Nordic community the parallels are striking when we consider the development of broadcast media, and particularly broadcast news. Our project included attempts to identify the foreign models that inspired developments in Swedish radio and television programming, and we have consistently sought to study developments in Sweden in the light of international trends and developments in other countries. What features of Swedish radio and television are peculiarly Swedish, and what features reflect developments abroad? Is there such a thing as a "Swedish model" of news journalism?

We found many parallels between Sweden and other countries having similar social, cultural and political patterns of development, particularly within the Nordic region. We also found several uniquely Swedish characteristics and phenomena, such as the more or less corporativistic relationship between the labour movement, the newspaper industry and the public service broadcaster, Sveriges Radio, and the extensive influence the company was allowed to exert on political policy decisions relating to radio and television. Another more or less specifically Swedish feature was the radical movement in the 1970s to democratize Swedish workplaces, with legislation requiring procedures for extensive staff participation in corporate and organizational decision-making. In the broadcast media Swedish producers acquired a unique degree of leeway which is a key factor behind the, by international standards, intense social criticism that characterized programming during the period.

It is when one tries to make international comparisons that the lack of a comparative perspective becomes painfully apparent. Even though most of the Nordic countries have produced national media histories, few areas permit systematic comparisons. The problem is that the existing Nordic historiographies are national in multiple senses of the

word: they are about national programme companies; the explanatory factors proposed are national; and the results are described and interpreted in national contexts. In historical narratives that are intended for domestic consumption many national idiosyncrasies remain tacit, are taken for granted. But social, political and cultural institutions, traditions, etc., that are common knowledge in, say, Norway are not necessarily known, even to the Norwegians' closest neighbours. Phenomena like the position of the Lutheran Church in Norwegian society, the epochal, national "language dispute", the relationship between metropole and the provinces (and vice versa), the political culture, etc., etc.

There is, in other words, a great need for systematic comparative historical media research. The prospects of such research are good – in the Nordic region at least. Obviously, comparative projects will reveal historical similarities and differences between our countries with regard to the media, but even more important, they promise to give us a better understanding of the social conditions (institutional arrangements) that underlie these similarities and differences. They can give us a better understanding of the relationship between media and society in an internationalized world.

Although I share the vision of a comprehensive comparative exploration of media, or perhaps communication, history, I feel that it may not be wise to start out on such a broad front, but instead go into greater depth in selected areas – themes, periods or genres – with a view to developing a systematic comparative approach, with analyses that take their starting point in a common theoretical framework and the same set of research questions.

A study of the professionalization of journalism in the Nordic countries is one interesting possibility. Another might be to explore the points of similarity and difference in the changes in journalism noted during the "commercialization phase" in the 1990s. Both projects have the potential to cast light on interesting differences between the countries with respect to the logic and structure of the field of journalism and the prevailing power structures within the field.

The map that the various historiographic projects have charted to date are not very detailed; there are many blank spaces, i.e., themes, genres and issues that none of the Nordic projects has managed to explore in depth. Each blank spot represents a task for future research.

Meanwhile, it is important for us to continue to examine and discuss the histories already produced – not only their approaches and methods and the research questions they address, but also their findings. What narratives have we spun, and what "truths" about the role and importance of the media in Nordic societies has our research revealed? Any history is a product of the historian's theoretical perspective and points of departure. That is why it is important for other researchers to be able to analyse our histories anew, from new and different points of view. There is no end to the interpretations a history can lend itself to.

One example of a critical re-reading – in which I am involved – applies a gender perspective to news journalism. In all the Nordic countries, men have long dominated and predominated in broadcast news. There is a tendency for media histories to be devoid of feminine life, and for the void to pass without comment, let alone problematization. In the new project, entitled "Women in the Culture of Journalism", we are re-reading history through gender lenses.

A greater emphasis on multidisciplinary approaches that can generate new perspectives ought therefore to be very beneficial. The overall vision at the start of the Swedish broadcast media history project was strongly multidisciplinary. In order to stimulate

thinking across academic frontiers, a good number of Swedish scholars from a diversity of disciplines and research traditions – literary criticism, media studies, history, political science, art history, etc. – were invited to take part in a series of roundtable discussions. These discussions resulted in the creation of a research project group. Three comprehensive projects were formulated. But, despite the commitment to multidisciplinaryism at the outset, a researcher from the Humanities was assigned responsibility for culture and entertainment, the social scientists took news and current affairs programming, and the political scientist and historian, broadcast media policy. In retrospect, it would have been interesting to see what might have resulted if the cards had been shuffled. Perhaps the next time around?

## Notes

1. The Swedish history of broadcasting programme consisted of three main parts. The first project took an “outsider” perspective and examined the political maneuvering around radio and television. Project leader for this part of the programme was Professor Stig Hadenius at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication (JMK) at Stockholm University. The project was summarized in a volume entitled “The Struggle for Monopoly” (*Kampen om monopolet*, 1998). The second and third projects focused on radio and television programming, each treating its own set of genres: the one, drama and dramatic genres, music, culture and entertainment, plus programmes for children and youth, under the leadership of Dag Nordmark, now at Karlstad University, was summarized in the book, “Living Room and Rumpus Room” (*Finrummet och lekstugan*, 1999). The other project was given the working title, “Broadcasting and Society”. The project leader was Professor Lennart Weibull at the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication at Göteborg University. I subsequently signed on to this project as assistant project leader with particular responsibility for certain documentary genres, with an emphasis on news and public affairs. We were also responsible for studying the reception of radio and television. Two studies of the radio and television audiences were initiated in this part of the programme, which was conducted by Birgitta Højjer and Cecilia von Feilitzen. The project was summarized in the volume “Mirror, Watchdog, Interpreter – News and Current Affairs Journalism in Swedish Radio and Television in the 20th Century” (*Spegla, granska, tolka – aktualitetsjournalistik i svensk radio och TV under 1900-talet*), published in September 2001. This was the third and final book produced by the programme.

The respective project leaders formulated a series of component studies that other scholars were commissioned to execute. Some of the studies were performed by doctoral candidates and were reported as dissertations; others were carried out by senior researchers. The three branches of the programme proceeded independent of one another, without a unifying theoretical framework. The lack of a common framework is also apparent in differences in the studies’ design, choice of approach, theoretical frameworks and, not least, the form of presentation.

2. See, for example, Peters (1999) and March and Olsen (1989); see also Allern (2001) who, based on Cook (1998), discusses how news media may be studied using an institutional perspective.
3. Translator’s note: The Swedish word, upplysning, has a broad range of meanings, from “information/notification” to “enlightenment” (as in the age of Enlightenment. Here, “enlightenment” should be understood dually as “the act of informing” and “education”, “edification”).
4. In the present article I shall not discuss the conceptual and epistemological pros and cons concerning whether our task should be to describe, explain, interpret or understand history, or the debate concerning the potential of historical research to fulfil these tasks. The interested reader is referred to Kjörup (1990), Høyjer (1990) and Dahl (1994), among many others.
5. Sveriges Radio was the name of the parent company for both public service radio and television, which in the 1970s were operated by two subsidiaries: Sveriges Riksradio and Sveriges Television, respectively. The parent company was dissolved in 1993, at which time sound radio assumed the name, Sveriges Radio.

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