

Media History Becomes Communication History – or Cultural History?

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During the Nordic Conference on Media and Communication Research in 1995 in Helsingør, Denmark, a group of researchers sat together to discuss what they should do collectively to continue the work started by various national press history and broadcasting history projects. In 1995, some project results, most notably the Finnish press history project, were already available in book form, quite a few were in progress, while some were just being planned. The most notable project in the last-mentioned category was the Swedish press history project, which, at the time of completion of this piece, had published its four-volume final product. The most recent of the national projects, the Norwegian press history, was probably no more than vague ideas at that time, but is now in progress.

The result of the above meeting was a seminar in Finland in May 1996, which in turn produced the book “Writing Media Histories. Nordic Views” (1997). The foreword of the book ended with the following statement: “Our future aims are reflected in the title of one of the articles: ‘The Need for Comparative Approaches’.” Material was being accumulated on the media systems and different media in the individual Nordic countries, and the next step would be to look at it systematically.

In that article, Lennart Weibull (1997) made a distinction between two kinds of comparisons. The more conventional kind focuses on *comparative descriptions*, and the more demanding on what he called *explanatory comparisons*. Comparative descriptions imply applying the same questions to materials from different countries, thereby identifying similarities and differences, and enabling researchers to assess, to use Weibull’s example, the extent to which radio development in Sweden, or in any other country, really is unique. Explanatory comparisons, on the other hand, give insight into the more general patterns in historical development of media, focusing on the social forces underlying this development.

The need for comparative approaches still exists today; we have not yet met the challenge we put to ourselves. Our time and energy has been occupied by other tasks; much remains undone, although bits and pieces have been produced here and there. Of the bits

and pieces I will mention just one, the *Nordicom Review* (1999) four-article theme section on press development in the Nordic countries, a project initiated by Sigurd Høst already in 1993. The time required to publish results reflects all the logistic, financial and other difficulties associated with finishing a multilateral project.

Material for Nordic comparison is accumulating, but there is also a need or temptation to go further on a national basis, or – and perhaps rather – with national materials and international or general frames of reference. As the phrase goes, theorising is general, but the cases and source materials are (often but not always) national.

Taking a national point of departure, I will briefly introduce the two major Finnish media, or medium, history projects: The History of the Finnish Press (SLH), published between the years 1985 and 1992, and the history project of the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), published in 1996.

The 10-volume press history, amounting to about 4400 pages, consists of seven volumes on newspapers and three on magazines. The seven “newspaper” volumes, furthermore, can be divided into three groups: volumes 1-3 comprise the history of the “daily” press, 1771-1985, volume 4 the history of the “local” press, 1894-1985, and volumes 5-7 are “reference books” presenting all the daily and non-daily newspapers from the whole period in alphabetical order. Volumes 8-10 deal with magazines and other periodicals for the most part by genre. Simultaneously, the Helsinki University Library published a bibliography of periodicals. A condensed version on Finnish press history was published in 1998 and was also translated into Swedish (Tommila & Salokangas 2000).

The structure of the 10-volume work results from a mix of theoretical and practical factors. The most important common denominator is Professor Päiviö Tommila (professor of Finnish history first in Turku, then in Helsinki, later Rector of the University of Helsinki), who initiated the project, managed it and pieced together financing from various sources. The main financier was the Academy of Finland. The Finnish Newspapers Association established a fund within the Finnish Cultural Foundation, which mostly financed printing of volumes 1-3 and 5-7. The then-independent Association of Local Newspapers financed volume 4, and the Association of Magazines financed volumes 8-10.

In Finland it has been customary to make a rather sharp distinction between “newspapers proper” (general dailies) and “local papers” (non-dailies, concentrating on their own circulation area). The newspaper types had two separate organisations up until the early 1990s, and also we, the researchers involved in the project, took the distinction for granted. It was even more “natural” to treat the magazines separately – but there was also a practical factor involved: this part of the project was a later expansion of the initial newspaper history project.

The broadcasting history project was commissioned by YLE, and within an intensive period it produced three volumes and over 1000 pages on YLE, from its establishment in 1926 to the mid-1990s. A condensed edition was also published in English (Yleisradio 1996) and Swedish (Rundradion 1997).

Significantly, both projects were conducted by historians, not media and communication researchers; in the newspaper history project only one of the authors, contributing a minor chapter, was a media researcher. This was also reflected in the researchers’ approach, and later in the other tribe’s response to their work.

The Finnish press history and the broadcasting history are both institutional histories, which was a “natural” approach for historians, and critique has been directed towards this

choice. However, it was also a deliberate and conscious choice, for which there were “theoretical” motivations and foundations.

“The research scheme for party press”, originally presented in my doctoral dissertation in 1982 (reprinted in an English language environment in Salokangas 1997), became almost the official policy of the press history project. The initial context of the approach was the Finnish party press in the early 20th century, and it was greatly influenced by research on the Swedish party press of the same era. Almost every newspaper was a committed party organ, the newspaper market was politically divided, and in the relation party-newspaper, the party was the primary actor. As a consequence, the contents of the newspaper did not seem so interesting, because they supposedly followed the party line. Reconsidered from the present position, this approach does not lead many thoughts to journalism, be it political or not.

The scheme had varying degrees of influence on the authors, a dozen altogether, of the volumes on newspapers. The volumes were intended as overall accounts, with the emphasis on the (political) structure of the press and the press system, while journalism as an object of empirical research was secondary, with the exception of the contribution dealing with the earliest decades of the Finnish press.

The same approach was quite evident also in the largest contribution (written by myself) to the YLE volumes. I wrote (quoted from Yleisradio 1996, 225): “In the published works used as a basis of this book, the object is explicitly and primarily the phenomena attendant to the product (programmes) and serving as its preconditions, and only secondarily the programmes themselves or programming as a whole. The programmes more often come forth via the reactions of the public than as programmes themselves. This choice of approach derives from experiences in treating the history of another mass media institution – the press. These experiences have reinforced the view that the main focus of histories of the ‘first generation’ has to be the background and context, in order that the ‘second generation’ can explain the content.”

Although the basic point of departure was to study the relation between YLE and Finnish society along institutional lines, programming was by no means absent in the treatment. The said relation, however, was not studied by means of reading it out from “texts” (programmes), but instead YLE was placed in society mainly by analysing the functioning of its administrative structure – which was political due to parliamentary control of the state-owned public service company – and studying the reactions to programming.

Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff’s (1991, xi) statements support this approach, although their book also deals more directly with the programmes. They wrote: “But broadcasting is not simply a content – what this or that programme is about, or might mean. It embodies, always, a communicative intention which is the mark of a social relationship. Each and every programme is shaped by considerations of the audience, is designed to be heard or seen by absent listeners or viewers. Programmes are highly determinate end-products of broadcasting, the point of exchange between the producing institutions and society. In their form and content they bear the marks of institutional assumptions about the scope and purposes of broadcasting and about the audiences for whom they are made. Judgements about the adequacy or otherwise of broadcasting are always based on assessments of the character and quality of output.”

I also refer to Scannell’s ideas about first and second generation histories, but with my own emphasis on a seemingly logical marching order: knowledge about how the institution works (first generation) makes the necessary basis for explaining the output of that

institution (second generation). Elsewhere in this volume, Klaus Bruhn Jensen (2002) refers to Scannell calls “second generation histories” research addressing questions beyond the basic organisation and output of a given medium.

Jensen’s suggestion, which I very much support, is that we should advance from medium histories to media history and further to communication history. With my background in the Finnish research community, as a historian turned journalism studies professor, and having very strongly promoted the contextualising approach, I still think that there is a logical marching order: *Medium histories* are in-depth studies that set the context, elucidate how the institution works, and may use limited materials in researching the output. *Media history* also takes up media systems in addition to what is done in the first phase. *Communication history* comes close to general cultural history, with media and communication as its point of departure.

As my task in this context is to present the Finnish perspective, I will roughly sketch an account of where Finnish research on media history now stands. In the 1980s, the media history scene was still dominated by “traditional” historians, but presently there is only a handful of “real” historians for whom media is the main area of research, and the younger generation of media historians come predominantly from media/communication/journalism studies – or cultural history. As a consequence of the fact that certain basic research “has already been conducted”, and because the academic background of the new generation is different, there has been a change of emphasis from the background to the output and beyond. Moreover, broadcast media seem to have become more interesting than the press, despite the difficulties in obtaining and using the taped materials.

An example of studies focused on radio and television programme genres is the project “A Common National Culture – A Mission Impossible? Information and Entertainment in the History of Finnish Radio and Television Programmes, 1945-2000”. The project was financed by the Finnish Academy and part of its research programme on media culture. The project comprises a number of case studies on “information”, “entertainment”, and programmes falling in between: one on the treatment of some key areas of life in radio and television news; one on current affairs programmes on television; one on programmes mixing elements of current affairs and entertainment and another focusing on a major case of that genre; one on radio entertainment from the late 1940s to early 1960s; one on the television theatres from the early 1960s to 1990s; and one on the Eurovision Song Contest as a television spectacle.

Through these cases the group hopes to say something more general about how Finnish radio and television addressed its audiences in the latter half of the 20th century, and through these studies the group also attempts to outline how national radio and television dealt with “a common national culture?” (emphasis on the question mark) and its diversification. The resulting doctoral dissertations and other studies may not yet be communication history, however some of them are certainly not merely media history but also cultural history in a broader sense.

Klaus Bruhn Jensen’s suggestion that we should move from media history to communication history is extremely appealing; actually he formulates and articulates an idea that has been around for a while. In his comparison of “mediated” and “non-mediated” communication, Jensen speaks of “media of two degrees”. Using, and maybe twisting, his thoughts, I ask whether they would justify extensive studies of the type “a history of country/region X from the point of view of communication”, or more conventionally “a history of media and communication in country/region X”? National/regional commu-

nication history might perhaps be structured chronologically around the “dominant” medium of each era.

In this case, the first phase would focus on communication and power structures prior to the era of newspapers, the dominant “medium” (beside the consolidating state structure) being the mouth. The second phase would be the newspaper era, the third the broadcasting era, and the fourth the digital era.

But, as pointed out by “media ecologists”, such phases are only marked by the “dominant” medium, and as new media appear, the earlier forms of media and communication do not disappear. The forms of communication and media simply accumulate, and as new media appear, the existing structures have to adjust. Finally, in the digital era the circle closes, as mediated communication becomes interpersonal interaction.

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