

Media Research Cutting Edges

All Quiet at the Nordic Front?

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*The media scholar could finally show that among media
Conservative papers liked Conservatives best whereas Leftist views
would more often turn up in rags to the Left. This he supported
with figures and tables and elegant curves.
What we'd thought all along, 'though no more than a hunch,
has therewith been elevated to a matter of fact.*

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Three decades ago my Swedish colleagues, Hadenius and Weibull, opened their prominent book on press, radio and television by presenting the above quoted quotation from *Dagens Nyheter*. It is hardly flattering that reactions from our skeptical audience indicate how media researchers primarily produce commonplaces. But let's face it: We usually inform the public about subject matters that informed citizens already believe they know very well in advance.

The mockers then (and their many followers) are perfectly right in saying that media and communication research rarely creates revolutions in terms of breathtaking sensations. But I strongly believe that Nordic media research – trivial as it may be – has been cutting edges of prejudice and ignorance in spite of the fact that many researchers live in splendid isolation and that specific projects only marginally influence the bulk of folklore about media and society. Against all odds we must go on patiently explaining to the outside world that the run of the mill is the rule of the game. Sensational results are dubious and exceptional – in mass communications as in most areas of academic scholarship.

This ongoing battle against prejudice is fought in the trenches of tedious “bread and butter research”. Like journalists, of course, most researchers fancy the original in tireless quest for the scoop, that collection of data so great and wild, you never have to apply for another research grant. No Nordic media researcher lives a full academic lifetime on one such spectacular cut. And that's fine: A few celebrities do not constitute the true front line forces fighting ignorance.

“All quiet”, consequently, is indeed an expectable and respectable battle-cry, neither an alarming sign of crisis, nor a symptom of lacking brainpower among our rank and file. It is true, no doubt, that much research in this area lacks originality and depth, reproducing me-too designs rather than producing new angles and insights. In our line of work this is the price to be paid for normal science in the Kuhnian sense: After all, breakthroughs and new paradigms are not to be expected at a regular basis, according to sociologists of knowledge. By reviewing current (Carlsson 1998) and classical (Berg et al. 1977) contributions, however, three aspects of Nordic efforts in this field may be identified as particularly important when approached from a cutting edge point of view:

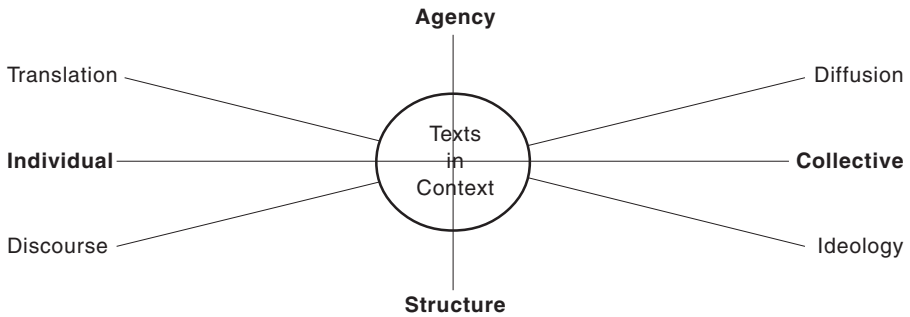
First of all, Nordic media research has contributed original insights by transforming and translating European ideas to the dominant English speaking (and American thinking) world of the mass media. Our mediating activities do not merely involve our local and national fonds of knowledge, but also include informed reading of the intellectually more profound contributions from French and German thought. The multilingual qualifications of Nordic academics have proven to be a very valuable asset when we set out to do front line services – be it in the capacity of commanding generals, liaison officers or simple privates.

Secondly, the Nordic research in mass communication has been strengthened by a notable tradition of cross border cooperation not only between different countries and languages, but also between the social sciences and the humanities. In contrast to specialized research tradition (particularly conspicuous in the USA) most Nordic departments of communication draw heavily on competing fields of scholarship combining methods, theories and skills from disciplines such as sociology, history, rhetoric, semiotic, ethnology, computer science etc.

The third accomplishment of Nordic research in mass communications has been gained through the continual competition between theoretical frames of reference. By cultivating an academic atmosphere of critical pluralism, e.g. keeping these biannual conferences in the *glasnost* spirit of NORDICOM, only a minority has become casualties of simple empiricism or barren dogmatism. The fierce fighting on the theoretical barricades of the 1970s did not result in few winners and many losers, but rather in a peaceful co-existence inspiring most Nordic mass media researches to be well read in competing schools of theory. This, in turn, has inspired many of us to combine apparently incompatible frames of reference thereby bridging unnecessary conflicts caused by academic vanity and petty rivalry.

Why this is so, and how this has been done, may be presented in terms of two basic schisms of international research: the dichotomies of the individual versus the collective, agency versus structure. The very center of attention has been massmediated texts in social context. Calling attention to such basics of our trade may illustrate the genealogy of Nordic mass communication research from the 1960s up to the coming end of the millennium.

The frontier of the 1960s may be characterized as attempts to comprehend mass media as agencies diffusing collective, textual action. In the 1970s the concept of agency was played down regarding mass communication as collective action in a structural framework. Context was everything – individual texts mere illustrations of structural trends. Ideology (and critique of same) were the names of the game. In the 1980s the structural focus was gradually moved from the collective to the individual level. Specific texts were primarily regarded as products of individual efforts (tabloid versus serious media, press versus television etc) framed by structural restraints, e.g. semiotics and political correctness. Discourse and hegemony became catchwords of the time.



In the 1990s we have experienced a move from structural frameworks towards new concepts of agency – particularly stressing the active part played by the individual user of mass mediated texts: Reception studies and focus on intertextuality made headlines in research journals. The construction of meaning is primarily seen as a negotiated translations and open question rather than a preconditioned content framed in structural context.

I could list a considerable number of learned colleagues who have been fighting battles along these lines. For every one mentioned, however, I would easily risk forgetting a dozen others. So instead of producing an incomplete lists of names and research projects, I have chosen one single illuminating example to illustrate how the three fundamental points of high quality research may inform further study in the future. The example chosen is The Swedish research programme *The Roles of Journalism* and the subsequent project *Media Societies around the Baltic Sea* initiated by sociologist Jan Ekecrantz and historian Tom Olsson.

The fundamental premise of these projects has been that mass communication in general (and journalism in particular) constitutes society, not only in terms of reinforcing social power relations, but more basically by editing institutional relationships, e.g. time and space in the public sphere of the welfare state. These social concepts are researched with reference to an empirical material consisting of national texts in regional and historical contexts. By combining elements from social science and the humanities, quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors wrestle with the crucial problems of rationality and modernity: How is society edited by mass media in different historical situations? How are forms and contents structured by individual and collective action?

By approaching journalism as texts in context Ekecrantz and his coworkers research mass communication as institutional practice. The crucial point, well taken, is that mass mediated texts must be regarded as individual as well as collective actions, instrumental to the construction and maintenance of the welfare state – in Sweden called “Folkhemmet” (the home of the people). On the other hand society and its citizens cannot be comprehended as social agents unless we regard “media society” as a contextual structure enveloping texts in the making.

It must be noted that this approach should not be mistakenly equaled to the textual fetishism of so called post-modernism. Ekecrantz and Olsson are neither social constructivists nor historical determinists. We may call them post-structuralists in the sense that they have moved through and beyond the structural and historicist front lines of media research of the 1970s and 1980s. The approach chosen may be regarded as an intelligent way of saving the qualities of critical theory without prescribing to a dogmatic ideology critique in order to take a stand outside the ongoing practice of text production.

What Ekecrantz and his co-workers do in theory and practice is to study texts not only because texts are where structured actions of modern society can be explicitly traced and intelligently criticized, but also because texts not only do things with one another: Society do things with texts, and texts do things to society. The result is cross-disciplinary strategies informing basic concepts of mass communication research:

As components of social acts, the texts help shape their own conditions – an “iron cage” of institutional truths. It is up to critical discourse analysis to reinstall the journalistic texts in their social context, and also to demonstrate how these contexts themselves are constituted in social interaction and gradually turned into institutions driven by a logic of their own. (Ekecrantz 1997:410)

One may characterize this line of research as genealogical – not only because *genre*-bound communication is in focus, but more fundamentally because the research objects are primarily studying subject matters taken for granted by mass and media. By studying such commonplaces in their making, Ekecrantz and his associates show us how things have been (and may again be) different from the rationality of today. Editing mass mediated texts is regarded as a continuous process of discursive translations – neither a linear diffusion of a given of material, nor the result of ideological determinism.

Regarding texts in contexts in this fashion produces important insights informing a number of concepts taken for granted in mass communication research. Ekecrantz and his coworkers have primarily perused this line of thinking in terms of the global joker “media society” used frequently by journalist as well as researchers, to describe a conglomerate of conflicting trends of late modernity.

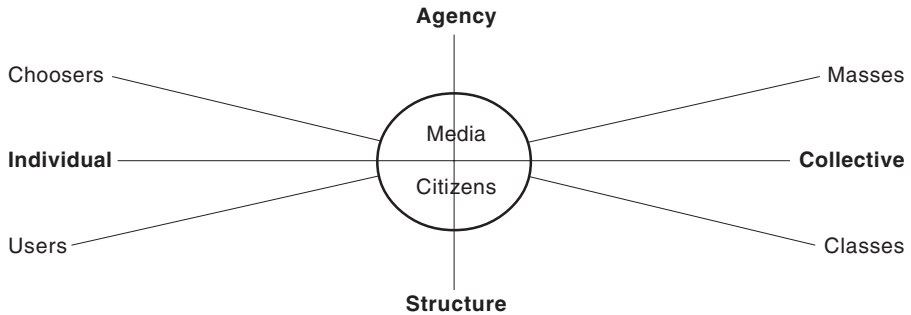
From a text-in-context perspective “media society” should not merely be regarded as technologies and infrastructure. It must be regarded as an institutional order consisting not only of polity based on individual agencies in the organizational sense, but also as an integrated part of a cultural system structured and structuring the rationality and dramaturgy of media outputs. Continuous battles over rationality are performed discursively and cannot be singularly accredited to technological change or acts of specific institutions. On the other hand there is no omnipotent class structure in play that can be specifically identified as “the invisible hand” of economic, political, or cultural forces.

More specifically Ekecrantz and Olsson have convincingly demonstrated this development by analyses of text produced in the Swedish press 1925-1987. They now propose to go on by researching the concept of “media society” by comparing the changes in Nordic welfare states with transitions of Eastern European countries around the Baltic sea in the years succeeding the fall of the Berlin wall. It is claimed that the social transformations in the aftermath of 1989 call for reassessment of central premises of social theory and media research.

Before I comment on one such reassessment let me briefly return to the quote from *Dagens Nyheter*: After the fall of the Berlin wall what seemed to be a banality in the 1970s is no longer such a commonplace: Left and Right are no longer simple matters of fact – neither in the mass media nor in society writ large. What was once taken for granted and regarded as a commonplace has turned into an intricate point of textual action ripe for front research in order to show how ideological concepts become taken for granted, and how the taken for granted may loose this taken for grantedness again.

This – in my opinion – is exactly where the vital research front of Nordic mass communication research is situated right now: We must practice conceptual hygiene reassessing basic concepts taken for granted in our specific field of study. I only have

time and space to point to one such reassessment, and have chosen the social construction of “the media citizen” – the very nucleus of communication research in the years to come. In doing so, I move beyond the frontier homesteaded by Ekecrantz and his coworkers, but I do so in line with the mind maps they have so convincingly produced.



If we put the concept “media citizen of the media society” into the clinical bench of agency-structure, individual-collective, I will argue that the front line in Nordic media research has moved several times over the last decades. In the 1960s the audience was primarily studied as “mass” – a passive and lonely crowd. In the 1970s many of us changed focus from mass to “class”, but in the 1980s and the decline of neo-marxism “class” became individual “users”. Finally, the trend of the 1990s have been to regard the public of segmented users as independent “choosers”, i.e. turning the powerless members of the lonely crowd into all powerful zappers of marked driven media. During these front line maneuvers what happened to the central concept of “citizen” in the classical sense of liberal democracy and critical theory of the public sphere once so popular as frame of reference for Nordic mass communication research?

Today, at the threshold of the new millennium, research based puns are made upon the word “citizen”, e.g. *netizen* (for world wide web users) and euphemism for “reflexive man” – a theoretically ill defined inhibitor of the so called “global village”. In spite of the impressive efforts by communication research we tend to forget that “citizen” is fundamentally a concept related to local community and national space. While citizenship and civil society become increasingly artificial and virtual in mass mediated texts, we tend to forget the genealogical context reminding us that to be a citizen requires naturalization and recognition by an authority. This affiliation of citizens to society, however, is usually taken for granted, rather than regarded as an integrated part of public service in the BBC-sense of the word: Citizenship should be regarded as an ongoing interpellation of individuals involved in public discourse – placing mass media center stage in the conflicting tendencies of the contemporary modernity.

I shall conclude my sightseeing at the cutting edge of media research by asking for more efforts of this kind aiming at better understanding of “the media citizen” as the key to better knowledge on the community of fragmented audiences, public service media, and changes in the functions of the public sphere. Other taken for granted concept should in a similar fashion be critically cut on the edge of media research, e.g. “public service” and “market-driven journalism”, “the global”, “the national”, and “the local”, i.e. implicit and taken for granted contexts of current research in media and mass communication.

This important task of basic research is ignored by most of our learned colleagues around the world preoccupied with ever more specialized detail studies. Hopefully, scholars of the Nordic countries shall continue to do tedious conceptual hygiene along these lines crossing borders in terms of nationality, discipline, and frame of reference. In other words, let's go back to the trenches – and may your grand theory be with you!

Note

1. Verse published in the Swedish daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* 1969, translated by Charly Hultén.

References

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