

The Future of Nordic Media and Communication Studies

The End of Splendid Isolation?

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My first reaction, after accepting the invitation to attend the panel on the future of Nordic media and communication studies in Kungälv, was sheer panic: how could I possibly present Finland there? Although I am a Finn and have been a member of the Finnish community of media and communication researchers for two decades, I have done little research on Finnish national media, but on foreign media instead, including post-communist countries. Even further, I am about to become an expatriot who has voluntarily decided to become the Other by not living in her home country, but in the UK instead.

My second reaction was a little less panic, because I thought that this in-between status I am now living would actually give me an opportunity to look at the situation not only as an insider but as an outsider as well. What is happening in Finnish media and communication research bears a great resemblance to that in the UK. We are talking here not only about the globalization of media, but about the globalization of media and communication research.

There are some rewards in becoming global, but also losses. One of them is that I have already personally lost one of the languages of my home country that would enabled me to present my paper in a Scandinavian language – once considered the most important asset in Nordic co-operation. Instead, I am using English, the language I was taught at school, but which did not have much presence in my country before the arrival of mass media and culture. But this is the language I increasingly use with my “new” Nordic colleagues who do not speak Scandinavian languages as their first or second language. My new colleagues are, of course, from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, and I am very much for including their countries under the appellation “Nordic”.

As media and communication scholars, we often refer to the role of the media in globalization, but we seem to forget that media and communications scholarship and its scholars are also a part of it. Whether we want to acknowledge it or not, we are agents of globalization. Curiously when Appadurai (1990, 297) talks about “ethnoscape, the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live”, he mentions tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guestworkers and other moving groups, but not scholars. We are not a significant group, but do our part by filling up economy class when

there is a conference somewhere in the world. And there always are: international and regional conferences around the world in which media and communication scholars, like other professional travellers, meet each other. We also do research and live in other countries for shorter or longer periods of time, although often but not always do come back to our home countries.

But we contribute to ideoscapes as well. We read books in foreign languages, absorb ideas and use them in our own countries. Media and communication studies, partly because it is so young, is very much influenced first by the US and then by the UK. In many ways, it has been a one-way street in which most of it has been imported without much reciprocity. I shall shortly outline the development of media and communication studies and give examples from Finland, which I know best; I believe that these developments also have relevance to the situation in other Nordic countries.

Four Periods of Finnish Media and Communication Studies

In my earlier work (Rantanen 1997, 127) I have divided the development of Finnish media and communication studies into four different periods according to the main sources of influence. They are: (1) The German influenced journalism studies from the 1920s until 1950s; (2) The US influenced communication studies from the 1960s until 1970s; (3) The Eastern European influenced marxist wave in the 1970s; and (4) The Anglo-American influenced media and communication studies from the 1980s onwards. I shall shortly describe each of these periods and the ethno- and ideoscapes in them.

As we all well know, communication studies as a discipline was founded in the US after World War II. Before that time, for example, journalism was taught outside universities in Finland, since 1925 at *medborgarehögskola (kansalaiskorkeakoulu)*. Journalism studies consisted mainly of professional training and of the history of the press and was very much influenced by German *Zeitungswissenschaft* and such scholars as Groth, Löbl, Dofivat and Diez, to mention a couple of names. The period of the German influence lasted until the early 1960s when US communication research, invented almost twenty years earlier, was imported to Finland.

In 1963 a paradigm shift took place when a newly appointed professor, Raimo Vehmas, declared that the German *Zeitungswissenschaft* was old-fashioned and unfruitful, and wanted to change it into communication studies to follow the example of Wilbur Schramm. Importing US communication research to Finland was greatly assisted by Fulbright and other scholarships that enabled researchers from different fields to get acquainted with communication studies in the US. Osmo Wiio, Kaarle Nordenstreng and Ullamaija Kivikuru all went to the US to learn more about communication research there. They all played a part in the ethno- and ideoscapes of Finnish mass communication research.

The US period lasted until the 1970s when it was partly taken over by the Marxist wave. In Finland, in contrast to many Western European countries, this was mainly imported from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Marxism was a counterreaction to the mainstream communication research made in the US, but it simultaneously relied heavily on US scholars such as Herbert Schiller. This time very few scholars actually went to Communist countries to study, but books by Lenin and Kuusinen appeared in the study requirements of Helsinki and Tampere universities.

Again, this wave broke when British cultural studies landed in Finland in the early 1980s. A Finnish researcher, Leena Paldan, was the first Finnish media scholar who went to the UK instead of the US in the early 1980s. Finnish media scholars have in-

creasingly turned to seek inspiration in the UK not only in cultural studies, but in media studies as well. Here we can refer to the influence from the centres of communication studies in Leicester and Westminster, from feminist media studies, as well as the Glasgow media group, Giddens, Fairclough, Tomlinson etc.

Research Assessment Exercise. New Standards for Research?

This is not the full story of the import of ideas. It seems to me that at least the University of Helsinki is also going to absorb the academic standards found in the UK. Research Assessment Exercise, RAE, that dominates the life of British universities has now been introduced to the University of Helsinki for the first time. Research is being evaluated and compared. Curiously, this happens at the same time when it is questioned in the UK whether the Research Assessment Exercise is the most efficient way to create a dynamic, innovation-oriented research culture. (Thompson 1999).

According to the guidelines for evaluation at the University of Helsinki (Research Assessment Exercise 1999), the highest rate (7) is given when “the majority of the submitted work are at a high international level and virtually all others at a good international level”, while the lowest rate (1) is given when “none, or virtually none, of the submitted works are at a fair international level”. A *high international level* means “work which is apt to arouse serious interest within international academic communities and which in principle could, if offered, be published by the leading international publishers or in the leading international journals with the most rigorous editorial standard standard”. A *fair international level* means “work which is of possible relevance for international academic communities and which has been published abroad or by well-known national publishers or in well-known national journals”. The best departments, with the most publications either published by prestigious publishers or journals, win “seven stars”, and more research money and fame until the next RAE.

What are these well-known journals? They are, of course, journals that use a referee system. The journals that do so in media and communications studies are mainly international journals, either European or American such as the *European Journal of Communication*, *Media Culture & Society*, the *Journal of Communication* and *Critical Studies in Mass Communications Research*. With the introduction of RAE it is not enough to publish in your national language in your own country, but it has become more and more important to publish in English elsewhere. Farrell Corcoran, an Irish media scholar and former president of the public broadcaster RTE, raised the question of the functions and disfunctions of introducing RAE into non-British countries at the IACMR panel on the future of European communication and media research in Leipzig in July 1999. He asked whether it is absolutely important to publish in international journals. If this is the case, what happens to our self-confidence in languages? All of us in the audience who had received the letters “thanking for considering one of these journals an outlet for your scholarship and regretting the outcome of the review process”, remained silent. It was our personal failure, and language did not play any role. Media and communication research seems to have accepted the market economy and competition almost unanimately.

We are not yet as far as in the UK, but on the basis of previous development we soon will be. Paula Saukko (1999, 71), a Finnish media and communication scholar, recently wrote about her experience when she was trying to get information about an academic job in the UK. The question of “What’s your four?” (meaning the four publications she needed to present for the next RAE) was asked before she could even start a telephone

conversation inquiring about a new job. Obviously, some foreign academics like Saukko (who is now a lecturer in the Centre for Mass Communications Research at Leicester University) have been successful: foreign academics employed by British universities have doubled to 11,314 between 1994 and 1997. According to a recent study, competitive exercises such as the Research Assessment Exercise, may also encourage universities to employ staff from abroad. The new vacancies are partly a result of hundreds of British scholars leaving the UK because of the disastrous academic policy of the Thatcher government, a government that also introduced RAE ('Looking for a slice of the American pie,' 1999; Swain 1999). Will this be the future in the Nordic countries as well?

The End of Splendid Isolation?

So here we are, after almost four decades of mainly absorbing Anglo-American communication, media and cultural studies. It seems to me that we have not only taken theories, concepts and research methods, but have even adopted the standards of academic life from abroad. There are several tendencies that are already visible in Nordic media and communication research. They are contradictory by nature, but so is globalization.

First, there is considerable influence from Anglo-American media and communication studies. It has mainly taken place by borrowing "research tools" and using them on national data. It has also meant that English has become an obligatory second language for scholars in our field: a media and communication scholar without a knowledge of English is as impossible as a computer without a screen. Recently, there have also been signs that the standards for research have been adopted from the UK. This does not only concern media and communication studies, but academia in general.

Second, there is also considerable exchange of ideas inside Nordic media and communication studies through shared language, culture and traditions that has lasted much longer than Anglo-American influence, and still has some traits of early German influence. Increasingly, it is in competition with Anglo-American media and communication studies. Also, the enlargement of the Nordic community to include the Baltic countries and European Russia brings inevitable, and I would say, welcome changes into it: it has to redefine itself and rethink the questions of shared language, culture and traditions. The former Other is now one of us. And, as Epp Lauk and Tom Moring both observed in Kungälv, the opening up does not only mean of including the Other, but learning from the Other as well. We who have been so eager to adopt Anglo-American media and communication research now face a new challenge: to learn from the countries that were once isolated by the Iron Curtain, that prevented *us* from seeing what was behind it. As Ricoeur (1965, 278), quoted by Morley and Robins (1995, 25) puts it:

When we discover that there are several cultures, instead of just one, and consequently, at the time we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be illusory or real, we are threatened... [by] our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just *Others*, that we ourselves are an 'other' among Others.

Third, there are some signs that Nordic media and communications scholars do not only leave their home countries for a short study leave, but the long period of Anglo-American influence has actually provided them with skills that make it possible to compete in job markets outside their home countries. The EU, of course, makes working in Europe much easier than before. On the other hand, non-Nordic scholars are like wise now able

to seek jobs in the Nordic countries. This is the occasion in which the Research Assessment Exercise can actually bring a change with its standardized requirements. As Saukko (1999, 70) writes about the UK: “Unlike in Finland, internal and national prearrangements can be badly disturbed when, for example, an Australian black horse [with her/his four or even more prestigious publications] appears in the job interview.” In a country like Finland, in which departments of media and communication studies mainly hire their own people, the RAE could have a positive outcome.

Fourth, traditionally Nordic scholars did research on their own countries, but they cannot monopolize them anymore. Researchers outside the “Norden” will now have a chance to become experts on its mass media. Recently, for example, Elena Vartanova, a Russian media and communication scholar from the Faculty of Journalism at Moscow University, has published two books on Nordic media (Vartanova 1997, 1999). She describes the current phase of the Nordic mass media system, when the Nordic media need to adjust to global developments, as “the end of splendid isolation” (Vartanova 1997, 183).

If Nordic media and communication research ever experienced a period of splendid isolation, then it is definitely coming to an end. This is the globalization of media and communication research in practice. What are the advantages and what are the disadvantages? And how well are we prepared for it? As agents of globalization it is up to us to think about these issues.

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