

Extended abstract:

# Society, media, theory

## *Three global challenges to media studies*

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In order to discuss to what extent and in what ways media scholars should engage with global challenges, Jürgen Habermas' (2002) distinction between three knowledge interests provides a useful point of departure. In general, his argument is that science is not value free but depends on human knowledge interests. These knowledge interests are not to be mistaken for individual or subjective interests, but are to be understood as social and intersubjective interests that motivate and constitute forms of human knowledge production. The three knowledge interests have different origins and concern different dimensions of human life:

- Technical: interest of control of nature through prediction
- Practical: hermeneutical understanding of identity, culture and history
- Emancipatory: critical awareness of alternatives to the present order

Media studies, as a research field, depends on all of these knowledge interests, and scholars are to various degrees oscillating between them. Scholars are simultaneously inside and outside the problems they examine, and this double position is actually a strength. Scholars are not only detached observers, nor are they only committed advocates. The conscious and reflexive oscillation between different knowledge interests could be described as a 'detached commitment'.

How do scholars address global challenges on the basis of such a 'detached commitment'? An answer can be approached by addressing three types of global challenges concerning society, media and media studies theory.

### **1) Global challenges to society: immigration**

Various forms of media (news media, social network media, etc.) have played an important role in the ways immigration has become a contentious issue in public debate during recent years. The role of media studies is not only to describe the development and characteristics of existing representations and discourses on immigration, but also to examine the socio-political dynamics of these discourses in and by media. For example, media scholars should question the ways in which political actors legitimize new immigration policies through reference to changes in public opinion and the growing critical media coverage of problems relating to immigration. This legitimizing argument is at most only partly true.

News media coverage and discussion of migration in online media may also be a supply driven phenomenon prompted by various political actors taking advantage of various media dynamics. A critical awareness of potential alternatives to the present order in the field of immigration may include research that examines how various media, including public service media and social network media, may stimulate critical, yet socially constructive debates about immigration and bring immigrants themselves into the debate.

## **2) Global challenges to media: infrastructure**

A second type of global challenge concerns the media themselves. During the last two decades, national control over media infrastructure has been substantially diminished, and this concerns both the ability of national policies to regulate media markets and nationally based media industries' ability to control the value chain of their own businesses. In short, national media markets have been disrupted by global media and technology companies such as Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Netflix. In addition to the question of control is also the problem of diminishing resources. Due to the disruption of previous business models, national media markets are systematically and increasingly losing money to global companies, in particular Google and Facebook.

This calls for research that both examines the political, cultural and economic consequences of this development and takes part in the generation of possible new ways of creating institutional structures that ensure a media system that supports democratic political functions and meets wider obligations towards culture and enlightenment. This research clearly also needs to develop a thoroughly international and global outlook, since these new media infrastructures cannot only be regulated at a national level, but need, for instance, European level regulation as well as other measures – for instance, regional industrial-political-cultural initiatives that may sustain media infrastructures.

## **3) Global challenges to media studies: theory**

A third type of global challenge concerns media and communication studies, which has been thoroughly globalized during the last decades. This has intellectually been highly stimulating and has clearly widened the horizon for research, in terms of methodologies, choice of empirical material and theoretical outlook. However, scholars should also be reflective and critical of the often implicit political and cultural values that follow the importing of predominantly Anglo-American theories. Many of these theories have, during the last decades, been developed against the backdrop of – and sometimes in reaction to – a digital revolution taking place in countries influenced by strong neoliberal policies and with limited experience with the welfare institution models of Nordic countries.

Many newer theoretical frameworks favour bottom-up approaches, constructivism, practice theory and so forth, and following such perspectives, political democracy and social justice arise through social mobilization against systemic structures dominated by big institutions, including big businesses and big governments. There is an anti-institutional stance embedded in some of this thinking, often building on a political ideal of the digitally enabled activism that flourishes through horizontal and networked forms of organization. The problem is that these forms of horizontal organizations may lead to a systematic underrepresentation of anti-authoritarian, centre-Left parties and movements

in parliaments in Europe due to their poor performance in election campaigns. In contrast, authoritarian parties and movements favour centralized and vertical organizational structures, while exploiting digital networks to their advantage (Bennett, Segerberg & Knüpfer, 2017).

Some (certainly not all!) of the theories circulating in media studies may not be very helpful for addressing global challenges, such as immigration, populism and disruption, among others, due to their implicit digital utopianism (Turner, 2006). They tend, unintentionally, to belittle the importance of building strong institutional structures to secure democratic representation, social equality and other values.

This is particularly a problem considering the Nordic context of the research being discussed here. Nordic countries have a long and successful tradition of combining self-reliance ('det myndige individ') and institutionalism: individual freedom, equality and horizontal engagement in politics rely on very strong institutional arrangements, and vice versa: strong institutions are not the enemy of individual freedom, but – at best – both of them precondition each other.

In conclusion: as media scholars addressing global challenges, we should also address the implicit knowledge interests and political implications of fashionable theories circulating within the field.

## References

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