

NordMedia

A Vital Venue, Then as Now

Reflections on Media Research 1973-2013

Ulla Carlsson

Three days in mid-June 1973 – the 18th to the 21st, to be exact – some seventy academics, policy-makers and media professionals gathered in Voksenåsen outside Oslo to discuss questions of an existential nature:

Where do we stand, where are we going, what kind of influence does what we do have, what do we aspire to do, and which allies, which adversaries define our function in a broader social context?

The majority of the participants were researchers, and they came from roughly a dozen different disciplines. Others were politicians and representatives of the media industry.

Among the speakers at the meeting were Kaarle Nordenstreng, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Tampere, who spoke about “Normative Directions for Mass Communication Research”, and Kjell Nowak, the Economic Research Institute, Stockholm School of Economics, who spoke about “Models for Mass Communication: In what context should the phenomenon be studied?” Another main theme during the meeting was “Media research, to whose benefit?” The report from the meeting was entitled “Media Research: Communication and Social Responsibility” (*Medieforskning: Kommunikasjon og samfunnsansvar*).

The researchers returned home with a dream of a discipline of their own, and the policy-makers and media people hoped for results from the academic community that might help them come to grips with a new media landscape.

The advent of television in the 1960s drew attention to the roles media play in society and to the conditions under which media operate – and, in extension, to the ‘logic’ of the media. The media landscape was transformed, and a new media culture emerged that had ramifications for both family life and social relations. These effects were amplified by the emergence of an unprecedented ‘culture of youth’ in a new socio-economic reality. All this, in turn, produced a number of new media genres. The terms of competition among media were fundamentally altered, which aroused concern about the effects of media on their audiences – youthful audiences in particular – in many quarters.

And ‘Information’ was a mantra in the public and private sectors alike.

This was in an era when our universities were rapidly expanding. New questions for research were raised, which had a lot to do with developments in the fields of Sociology,

Psychology, Political Science, Economic History, Linguistics, the Arts and Philosophy. Old theories and methods were revisited; new ones were elaborated.

These were the first steps toward establishing what was then called Mass Communication Research, or Media Studies, as an independent discipline, the results of which we can see these four decades later. For the Nordic meeting at Voksenåsen 1973 marks a distinct turning point – as its agenda so clearly illustrates.

These developments were largely the doings of a number of pioneers who by today's standards were extremely versatile in their research interests, readily shifting between 'micro' and 'macro'.

But, there was another key factor, as well. The founding and growth of the discipline was steered by a strong demand for new knowledge and competence on the part of both policy-makers and the industry. From its inception, media and communication research had a highly normative streak – with a focus on 'social practice'.

These, then, were factors that broke ground and cleared the way for the institutionalization of 'media and communication' in our colleges and universities.

There is yet another factor that should not be lost sight of. It is difficult to speak of the *NordMedia* Conference without speaking about Nordicom – the lives of the two are closely interwoven. Nordicom was founded the same year as the meeting in Voksenåsen. Started as a documentation center for Nordic research literature, over the years Nordicom has grown into a knowledge center for users throughout the Nordic region, Europe and the world. The research done here in the Nordic countries was no longer a mainly local concern; through Nordicom its reach became worldwide.

A Fruitful Interaction Between National, Nordic and International Research Arenas

Together, the Nordic research conferences and Nordicom constituted an arena that was large enough to constitute a 'critical mass' that allowed the development of the discipline at national level. It wasn't possible otherwise in any *one* of the countries at that time – with the exception of Finland, where Journalism and Mass Communication, and Communication Studies, respectively, had been independent and well-established disciplines for many years. But, without a doubt, Nordic collaboration has had a lot to do with the development of the discipline in the Nordic countries.

Two major assets going into this Nordic collaboration were, of course, a longstanding sense of kindredness among the Nordic countries and the similarities of our media systems. Nor should we underestimate the advantage of some degree of understanding of each other's languages, albeit far from universal. And not least, we should remind ourselves that the 1970s were still a time of post-war 'Nordism'.

Nordic research collaboration also benefited from Nordic researchers' active involvement in the International Association for Mass Communication Research (IAMCR) and the organization's regularly recurring conferences. Nearly all the Nordic 'pioneer researchers' were present at the conference in Leipzig in 1974 – this conference marked a definite step in the history of IAMCR. The meetings of the 1970s addressed major issues of the time. Nordic researchers formed a striking contingent at international meetings, and they signed the spirit of the times. The Nordic imprint on the IAMCR conferences in Leicester 1976, Warsaw 1978, Caracas 1980 and so forth was unquestionable. The

region was making a name for itself in the international research community.

It is hardly coincidence that the Swedish research association was formed on the way home from Leicester 1976, and the Norwegian association at the conference in Warsaw 1978. In retrospect it is interesting to see how several different factors, especially Nordic and international processes, worked together to make an extraordinary national expansion possible in the respective countries.

An interplay of national, regional and international processes was decisive for the development of the discipline in the Nordic countries. And the region as a whole was its hub.

Research and education in media and communication were finally unified in the Nordic countries in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The process took place more or less simultaneously, in a variety of academic departments, some in the Social Sciences, others in the Humanities. This was the case in Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Fights, Unity and then Rethinking

Viewed in a historical perspective, media researchers in the Social Sciences and media researchers in the Humanities kept their distance from one another in terms of theory and methodology for some time. In the Humanities, the focus often rested on the meaning of human expression from the perspective of Linguistics, Philosophy, the Arts and Literature. The social scientists had, for their part, occupied themselves more with the media institutions and their relations with other institutions, particularly those having to do with democracy, and the effects and comprehension of mediated messages.

But let us not get the idea that we were all ‘one big happy family’. Far from it. In time, conflicts arose, not just squabbles, but serious divides – between scholars in the Humanities and those in the Social Sciences, between positivism and hermeneutics, between empiricism and theory, between Left and Right and, not least, between quantitative and qualitative approaches. For many years, a ‘front line’ ran through the Nordic research community, dividing those who applied quantitative methods from those who used qualitative. Harsh words rang through our ranks. There were even occasions when words led to push, and push to shove. Passions can run high, even among academics!

Then came the ‘cultural turn’ in the 1980’s. The cultural turn had a strong impact on the development – theoretical, empirical and methodological – of both the Humanities and Social Sciences in all our countries. The ‘cultural turn’ represented a development that brought researchers in the respective traditions closer. Scholars in the field increasingly trained their focus on the roles media play in cultural processes, on the media’s potential to create meaning in a broader sense, and on the adaptation of media messages to modes of understanding commonly applied to cultural phenomena. The concept of reception and text became centra. It was a process of hybridisation in some regions of the field. The ‘cultural turn’ had a far stronger impact on media and communication studies than on many other fields.

The conflicts subsided, but our field was diversifying at an accelerating pace, while it was also expanding. The statistical curves for book publication and new journals bulged, new groups of researchers were founded. And, not least, a trend toward increasing specialization ‘took off’. Most of the impulses that reached us in this era came from the USA and Great Britain.

And so came something of an identity crisis. The question, 'Is Media and Communication Studies really a discipline or just a field of study', once raised, would not go away. It haunted us – for decades.

Discussions about the relevance, the status, even the legitimacy of our work figured increasingly often on our agendas – often phrased in terms of 'rethinking'. Self-critical examinations were carried out, not least in the USA, and they colored both regional and national research conferences in our part of the world. The special issue of *Journal of Communication* in 1993, on "The Future of the Field" was widely read and sent ripples through our waters.

In the Nordic meetings of the 1990s doubts began to be raised as to the wisdom of striving to be an independent discipline. Might it not be leading in the wrong direction, toward isolation from established disciplines? These voices pointed to the major changes taking place in our societies, to the globalization of media, new ICT, democratization processes after the fall of the Wall, and the emergence of more variegated multicultural societies in Europe. There was clearly a need to develop our knowledge, to gain a better understanding of these and other phenomena.

The 'doubters' saw a risk in ever-greater specialization. Media research is, and must be, an interdisciplinary field of study, they argued. The times called for a rapprochement with 'the parent disciplines'. Several researchers pointed to the kind of cul de sac that awaited, unless we developed our theory. Continuing to 'borrow' our science from other disciplines implied a barren future. Then, as now, a good number of media studies were done outside the field of Media and Communication Studies proper, and scholars from other disciplines were invited to Nordic meetings to enrich our understanding of the media and to 'build bridges'.

Probably for a variety of reasons, it was common practice to invite American and British colleagues to our meetings. The Nordic region was a 'player' in international research, and there was a need to exchange views and findings, but it may also have been that Anglo-American 'star quality' helped to legitimize the discipline here at home. Our collective self-confidence needs a boost every now and then, it seems.

The themes of the Nordic meetings and the focus of the various working groups mark the paths we have followed over the years (Appendix 1). The number of working groups mushroomed to the extent that the arrangers of the 2007 meeting at Karlstad decided to group them into divisions. The numbers of participants continue to swell, as well. Whereas the meeting in 1973 gathered about 70 people, today we are 380, and all are academics. Twenty-five papers were presented at the 1973 meeting; here in Oslo we have 270.

Today, nearly all our colleges and universities have departments of media and communication studies. The graduates produced each year number in the thousands, and a good number of doctoral theses are presented. More than 60 dissertations were approved in the Nordic countries in 2012.

New generations of scholars, who have their backgrounds in the Media and Communication discipline contrast with the eldest generation, who started out in traditional disciplines. Society changes, and the 'communication society' has metamorphosed in many respects. Researchers move about freely in international environments – particularly Anglo-American ones – and publish articles in prestigious international journals. Yet, the Nordic meetings are still attractive. This Oslo meeting breaks all records, in terms of both the numbers who have gathered here and the papers being presented. This

must be proof of the value of *NordMedia* to the research community in our region. It represents a classic example of long-lived and vital Nordic cooperation.

Looking Forward

Digitization, coinciding as it does with increasing commercialization and far-reaching media convergence, is changing our communication systems – in terms of time and space, as well as modes of social behaviour. The structure of both governance and markets, with ever new kinds of transnational companies, has been transformed. Contemporary global and multicultural societies raise more complex issues than ever before.

The scientific community is in a situation where the accumulation of knowledge, the formulation of concepts and models of thought must respond to calls to contribute to an understanding of crises in society and social life, and to help solve them. This is a challenge for the media and communication research field, too. This situation demands that the research community revive its curiosity in order to explore new phenomena in society around us.

And the demands facing us in the Nordic research community are perhaps ‘extra large’, inasmuch as we are one of the most intensely ‘linked’ regions of the world. Globalization processes force us not only to focus more on transnational phenomena in general, but also to highlight difference. We have to work to bring about a stronger focus on regional inequalities and social transformation – there are many different kinds of widening gaps and divisions. Gender issues not to be forgotten.

Today the media and communication field is broad and characterized by diversity and extensive specialization. Few syntheses embrace the field as a whole. The rapidly growing flora of journals these days mirrors the situation. New research specialities are carved out, and new journal titles started up all the time. It is a situation of exceedingly keen competition for research funding. There is a general ‘hysteria’ concerning rankings among universities. At the individual level there is pressure to publish articles as a measure of productivity, of citations as an indicator of quality.

This implies a risk that perceptions of academic standards will continue to vary, and with them the quality of published work. Variation in standards is not to be confused with a healthy variety of interests, points of departure, concepts and methods, without which the discipline cannot thrive. Theoretical and methodological pluralism needs to be deliberately cultivated, and this requires competitive interaction between research environments of high quality.

When the issues are as complex as those we face today, holistic perspectives are really important.

The process of ‘dismantling’ public systems has also affected universities in their role as producers of knowledge, followed by effects that threaten to limit researchers’ critical and creative capacities – even in the Nordic countries. The frantic hunt for research funding, increasing pressures to publish in international journals, and far-reaching specialization – on a market that has become increasingly trend-sensitive – are not unrelated. Thought, ‘second-thoughts’ and reflection are scarce in day-to-day academic life. Monographs, as demanding of the scholar’s time and effort as they are important to our science, are not profitable ventures. All too little time is devoted to academic debate and critique; there is no ‘career value’ in such undertakings.

Viewed against this background, the *NordMedia* conferences become even more important. A regional conference that covers Media and Communication Research in all its aspects – and that builds on continuity. A conference that still has room for, and encourages, discussion, reflection and getting to know each other.

Finally...

Scholars in different parts of the world frequently come back to the question of what is needed in order to be able to formulate the really difficult, the really important questions about contemporary society. How do we move towards an innovative agenda, one that cuts across ethnic, cultural, religious and political boundaries and at the same time can enhance the quality and value of our research in different parts of the world?

Internationalization is both enriching and necessary in the intercultural and global world of today as it is with regard to our common interest in broader, more all-inclusive paradigms. Quite definitely, we need more collaboration – within our field, with other disciplines, with society around us and collaboration across national frontiers. We need to learn more from one another, to share knowledge and context.

We have to build on past work, but break new ground. We need fresh, unexpected insights and new comparative research questions. We need to develop analytical frameworks that will guide comparative analysis of communication for development. Without comparative studies we run an obvious risk that certain factors will grow out of proportion.

We have to recognize that globalization calls for regional epistemologies and multidisciplinary research approaches. It is important to maintain and further develop regional collaboration, not least as a means to ensure that internationalization does not take place at the expense of knowledge about, and reflection on, scholars' own societies and cultures. Fruitful national and regional dialogues are a great boon in international exchanges and vice versa.

So, my conclusion is that the *NordMedia* conferences have a given place in years to come, and that the meetings may even in the longer term assume decisive importance, both to the development of the discipline in the Nordic countries and to our success in the international arena. When I read through reviews of the titles Nordicom publishes in international quality periodicals – and there are many such reviews – three things stand out: 1. that the most widely read articles concern new phenomena relating to contemporary media culture; 2. that reviewers find the democracy perspective particularly interesting; and 3. that 'the Nordic voice' is so often explicitly mentioned in a most positive tone.

I have worked for many years – almost as many years as the *NordMedia* Conference has existed – with the Nordic region as a base, and I am quite convinced that constructive Nordic collaboration can both stimulate and improve efforts on a national level and strengthen the countries of the region in European and international arenas.

So, it is time to further strengthen our capacity to propose and imagine models that contribute to more holistic paradigms of civilizations – nationally, regionally and internationally. It is all about our accumulated knowledge, our memory, our ability to adopt a critical approach, our creativity and – not least our will. We must, put very simply, dare to do more – together! And *NordMedia* continues to provide a most fruitful platform for that mission – today and tomorrow.

Appendix

Themes

Nordic Conferences for Media and Communication Research 1973-2013

No	Place	Year	Theme
1	Voksenåsen, Oslo	1973	Media Research: Communication and Social Responsibility
2	Bjerringbro	1975	Communication and Democracy
3	Orivesi	1977	The Scientific Status of Mass Communication Research
4	Umeå	1979	Trends in the Mass Media in Norden: Output, demand, consequences
5	Reykjavik	1981	Is it Possible for Communication Research to Influence Media?
6	Volda	1983	Media: Structure, Distortion and Drama
7	Fuglø	1985	New Perspectives on Mass Media
8	Helsinki/Leningrad	1987	Mass Media and Cultural Change
9	Borgholm	1989	Media and Journalism in Transition. Organizational Structures, Contents and Audiences
10	Reykjavik	1991	Power and Media, Thoughts and Reflections on Contemporary Europe
11	Trondheim	1993	Research, Trends in the Media and in Research
12	Helsingør	1995	Visual Media in Our Cultures
13	Jyväskylä	1997	Theory and Methodology in Media Research. A New Media Landscape – Research on Modern ICT
14	Kungälv	1999	Where do the Front Lines of Mass Communication Research Run Today?
15	Reykjavik	2001	New Generations – New Media and Media History
16	Kristiansand	2003	Movie Rhetoric and International Politics. Media, Globalization & Identity. Rhetorics in Media Studies – Media Studies in Rhetorics
17	Aalborg	2005	Media Research – Demarcations and Interfaces
18	Helsinki	2007	Generations, Communication and Media Philosophy
19	Karlstad	2009	Body, Soul and Society
20	Akureyri	2011	Media and Communication Studies – Doing the Right Thing?
21	Oslo	2013	Defending Democracy: Nordic and Global Diversities in Media and Journalism.

