

## **Media and Communication Research Goes Global. Reflections from a Nordic Horizon**

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### **Abstract**

The scientific society is in a situation where the accumulation of knowledge, the formulation of concepts and models of thought must face the need for contributing to the understanding and even solution of crises regarding society and social life. That is a challenge even for the media and communication research field. Digitization 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 behavior. The structure of both governance and markets has been transformed. The contemporary global and multicultural societies raise more complex issues than ever before. 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? There is a need for more all-inclusive paradigms and holistic perspectives based on the awareness that globalization also calls for regional epistemologies and multidisciplinary research approaches.

### **Introduction**

Our contemporary global and multicultural societies raise more complex issues than ever before. Internet and the ongoing digitization of media have transformed the media and communication landscape, and in turn transformed the social functions of media and communication and the structure of both governance and markets with even new types of transnational companies and media conglomerates.

These new contexts are a challenge for the media and communication research field. But, still the overall objective must be to enable our research field to answer questions about access to and the use of media and communication, the role of media and communication with regard to the distribution of power and influence in our societies, in addition to questions relating to media and communication content and the role of media and communication in everyday life and social change.

How can researchers in the field initiate and sustain dialogues on international scenes? And from a Nordic point of view - How can small countries with languages spoken by only a few million people gain recognition? The answer lies in collaboration across frontiers, both national and academic. An interplay of national, regional and international processes is decisive for the development of a field.

## **The Status of Media and Communication Research – a global perspective**

Media and communication researchers have for a long time been working with issues regarding communication rights, media development, communication for development and social change, media concentration, etc. As early as the 1960s and 1970s, several media researchers were developing the field of mass communication research. The prime issues of that day concerned the end of colonialism and the political, economic and social development of states that had newly won their independence. This was also a period of technological advances: with television and communication satellites. The world became more global.

Changes in society and technology enforced new knowledge that turned previous knowledge on its head; new theoretical and methodological perspectives were developed - to a great extent as a consequence of an internationalization of research, including seminal work on the role of communication in national development, studies of the flows of news and information between countries and continents, of hegemony over the global media system, and so forth.

Society differs radically from that of the 1960s and 1970s, when the media and communication research field was formed. The contemporary global and multicultural societies raise more complex issues than ever before. The market paradigms based on the principle of the accumulation of private gains has become the driving force and organizational basis for social life in almost every country in the world.

But still some fundamental principles remain and they are different freedoms – *the freedom to think, to speak, to read, to listen, to write and to communicate with others*. Always we have to take human rights into account.

In order to be able to make use of human rights, citizens have to have some education and be in good health. Thus, many groups of people living in poverty are unable to use their rights. They often face social inequality, poor schools, gender discrimination, unemployment and inadequate health systems. People caught up in war and violent unrest are especially vulnerable. Millions of people have been driven from their homes and have no civil rights whatsoever.

This is a context we have to understand, recognizing *that power, hegemony, equality, justice and identity* are concepts of decisive relevance.

We also have to consider the unbalance of power at different levels today. It is important to pay attention to the reconsideration of the state power in a new emerging power structure within and over the nation-state - of public, private or civil nature. Today there are, for example, a number of dominant transnational companies, also regarding media and communication, that are accountable only to holders of political power or the market – they fail in their responsibility both to the societies in which they operate and to the citizens of those societies.

New kinds of conflicts due to organized crime, fundamentalism/extremism and acts of terror cannot be ignored. While horizons broaden, the world also seems to retreat further from us. Some people feel the need to defend their identities, and when common cultural platforms can no longer be maintained, stockades are raised around local cultures, religious beliefs and communities. Transcendence of boundaries and defense of boundaries are twin aspects of the globalization process.

Globalization processes forces us not only to focus more on transnational phenomena in general, but also to note and explore differences. We have to argue for a stronger focus on regional inequalities and social transformation, and understandings of democracy and human rights from a multipolar world perspective - there are many different kinds of widening gaps and divisions. The gender issues not to be forgotten.

Media are vital to democracy. The presence of pluralism and independence of the media are essential to democratic rule - whether publishing takes place offline or online.

Media have long served as central, shared sources of information, as 'watchdogs' and as fora of discussion – in short, they have provided a public space. Digitization, 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 behavior. These changes are transforming the public space. Periods of change like this have occurred before, and they will occur again - as our history of the past 250 years makes clear.

The communication society of today has a tremendous potential. Media and communication represent social and cultural resources that can empower people, in both their personal development *and* their development as citizens from a democratic perspective. We have access to knowledge and an awareness of events that only 'yesterday' were far beyond our horizons.

And, we can make our voices heard in many different ways. Each of us can be our own writer, editor or director. We can communicate and interact as never before.

But, these potentialities also have implications. When each of us is able to create our own frame of reference – according to our own interests and preferences – and our own personally tailored flow of information, it means that we can turn our backs on others' perspectives and others' flows.

It has never been easier to find qualified information than it is today. And, it has never been easier to avoid that kind of information, or to be misinformed. Which, in turn, implies a risk of widening knowledge gaps and a polarization of views, of how we perceive reality.

With what implications for democracy and freedom of expression- we have to ask.

Democracy does not work without well-informed citizens with a critical eye, and well-informed citizens cannot exist without reliable media and journalism that trains a critical eye on those who wield power. This has long been considered axiomatic. But does it still hold?

Every day we see threats to freedom of expression: new forms of state censorship and repression, self-censorship, surveillance, monitoring and control, gatekeeping, propaganda, misinformation, organized crime, act of terror, anti-terror laws, threats to journalists – even murder of journalists - plus a variety of commercial hindrances.

On the web there is an ongoing battle against unlawful control and censorship– addressed to both ideological driven governments and commercially driven players. Participation, privacy and security are closely interrelated with democracy and freedom of expression.

These conditions emphasize that media literate citizens are essential for democratic development. Media and information literacy is without doubt a key competence today

### **Rethinking ...**

Now, as then, issues of democracy and development are central, and once again in at least one sense, technological advances are a prime motor force - not least the questions how to bridge the knowledge divides and how to use media and communication both as tools and as a way of articulating processes of development and social change.

Access to information and the ability to share information is fundamental in the empowering of citizens, regardless of who and where they are. Information and communication can mobilize, increase transparency and accountability, and it is a stimulus to participation, active citizenship, lifelong learning and social change. Information can mobilize, increase transparency and accountability, and it is a stimulus to participation, active citizenship, lifelong learning and social change.

The role of information has been formulated in these terms for decades. Different paradigms have emerged. Now we need to regain our sense of context and to broaden our perspectives in a holistic direction.

The research area and knowledge production are different nowadays. The character and directions of academic inquiry are ever-changing. Old subjects evolve, their influence waxes and wanes; new subjects emerge. All as the result of many different intellectual and social processes on different levels - national, regional and international.

The scientific society is in a situation where the accumulation of knowledge, the formulation of concepts and models of thought must face the need for contributing to the understanding and even solution of crises regarding society and social life. That is a challenge even for the media and communication research field.

The core conceptual apparatus established 30 to 40 years ago is somewhat inadequate. A good deal of renovation is called for if we are to comprehend the changes that are taking place. Concepts are not entities unto themselves; they acquire their meaning from the contexts to which they are applied. And we need to know more about how the concepts relate to each other.

And, perhaps the Swedish researcher Jan Ekecrantz was right, that we need a “return to historical, disciplinary roots, reinserting media in the social and the cultural” (Ekecrantz 2007). With awareness of the increased economic importance of the media and communication sector around the world that is especially important.

But, 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.

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 qualitative research environments.

When the issues are as complex as those we face today, and there is often no linearity between cause and effect, that is when holistic perspectives are really important.

Specialisation that produces studies of high quality is not a problem in itself, but it can be problematic unless accompanied by inquiry on a systems level. Without these latter studies, we have no knowledge of the whole to which we can relate the various parts. There is a risk that a high degree of specialisation may lose its fertility for lack of ideas and an inability to formulate new problems of relevance. An essential prerequisite for a fruitful development of knowledge is an interaction between micro and macro.

The process of dismantling public systems has also affected universities in their role as producers of knowledge, followed by problematic effects as a limitation of researchers' critical and creative capacities. The frantic hunt for research funding, increasing pressures to publish in international journals, ranking systems, 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.

### ***Internationalization based on regional knowledge***

What do we need to be able to formulate the real and difficult questions – not least regarding communication and development? This question occupies many researchers today, and there is a call for greater internationalization of media studies.

A great deal of research has been done and is being done in many different places - in different academic disciplines around the world. But any one of us most probably is acquainted with only a small fraction of the work done or in progress. What means do we have to obtain an overall result that is relevant to our needs, in view of all the differences that nonetheless characterize the global system?

How do we move towards an innovative and international agenda for these issues, 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. This implies a learning process. Quite definitely, we need more collaboration - within our field, with other disciplines, with society around us and collaboration across national frontiers – not least beyond our familiar intellectual habitat. 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 to grasp and absorb new and unexpected insights and to question our ‘givens’. 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. Statistics would play a crucial role in this respect - always to remember that globalization calls for regional epistemologies.

We have to maintain and further develop national and 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.

Organizations like IAMCR , ECREA and ALAIC, AMIC and Nordicom - well established international and regional platforms with a sense of the history of the field – are more important than ever. Such fora where the most important major issues of our time can be addressed – especially with regard to scholars’ interest in broader, more all-inclusive paradigms.

Such fora can also help us in the important process of what I would call ‘creative self-examination’. Where we consider the relevance of the questions we formulate, where we are more judicious in our choice of the theoretical perspectives and methods, and where we evaluate the validity of our findings and the conclusions we draw from them. It is time to regain the initiative - nationally, regionally and internationally – to test our capacity to propose and imagine models that contribute to more holistic paradigms of civilizations – and that is about our accumulated knowledge, our memory, our ability to a critical approach, our creativity, our integrity and ethics, and – not least our will.

We must - put very simply - dare to do more - together!

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