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Media Studies the Nordic Way

Formations and futures

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Abstract

Based on an overview of Anglo-American stocktaking of media and communication studies, this article situates Nordic media studies as a third route staked out between academic binaries of administrative and critical approaches. The key argument is this: Nordic media studies displays distinctive features of development that are shaped by Nordic welfarist ideals from the 1970s and 1980s rather than by international trends in the academy. Furthermore, these ideals are worth holding on to if the field of media studies is to thrive with quality and relevance in a globalised, connected, and deeply datafied platform society. I take media studies – not communication studies – as my point of departure, since this is the most feasible umbrella term when studying current modes of communication that are technologically mediated in ways that can be stored, shaped, and shared across time and space.

Keywords: "ferment in the field", academic field, normative theory, welfarism, common good

Introduction

This is a normative article in the second degree. I claim there is a correlation between Nordic welfarist ideals and the formation of media studies in the Nordic countries in the 1970s and 1980s. Both, I argue, are essentially normative projects centred around claims of the common good, democratic justice, and equity. Furthermore, I make the normative contention that it is important to explore this correlation because it holds important insights that are worth holding on to if the field of media studies is to thrive with quality and relevance in a globalised, connected, and deeply capitalist platform society.

Stocktaking in media and communication studies

There is no dearth of stocktaking and joint reflection in media and communication studies. Joseph Turow and Nick Couldry (2018) recently claimed the death

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of media, and media studies, as interpretive practices in view of the combined forces of datafication and surveillance. Similar exercises have been conducted at regular intervals, at least since the publication of the now classic themed issue of the *Journal of Communication* in 1983, presciently termed ferment in the field. According to one of the journal editors, George Gerbner (1983: 4), the issue addressed "questions about the role of communications scholars and researchers, and of the discipline as a whole, in society". Essentially, the 35 contributions[1] from Europe and North America debated the challenges posed by more critical approaches to the dominant paradigm of uses-and-gratification studies. Read in retrospect, the issue revisits oppositions between mainstream administrative and critical approaches, oppositions that hark back to Paul Lazarsfeld's (1941) classic essay. It also illuminates the rather narrow reach of the claims made, since these were primarily based on Anglo-American traditions. While the 40 authors came from a wide selection of countries, they belonged to a limited selection of intellectual lands.

The *Journal of Communication*, a lead journal under the aegis of ICA, pursued the process of self-reflection with further, more inward-looking special issues (Levy, 1993; Levy & Gurevitch, 1993; Pfau, 2008). In the journal's latest follow-up, editors Christian Fuchs and Jack Qiu (2018: 220) take a more inclusive perspective, calling for "communication scholarship [that] can and should contribute to the creation of a sustainable information society" in view of what they see as key trends in the field of media and communication:

> (a) communication studies on a global scale, (b) researching communication in the fast-changing digital media environment, (c) the importance of critical communication studies, (d) the new critical and materialist turn, and (e) praxis communication and ways to address power imbalance in knowledge production.

Few would question the editors' plea for media and communication research contributing to a sustainable information society, and many will applaud their inclusion of contributions from a wider range of scholars than earlier ferment issues, including post-colonial critique and materialist analysis. Yet, contributors in this latest ferment issue are drawn from social sciences, in particular sociology and political science. Arts and humanities approaches are sorely lacking, as are traditions drawing on computer science.

Given the state and focus of reflection on the field in the international research community, it is worth turning to the Nordic countries of Europe. How do the Nordic countries fit the picture painted by the various ferment reflections? An answer cannot be provided on solid empirical grounds, since few have ventured beyond providing selective accounts of how media studies developed on a national level. An exception is Tarmo Malmberg (2018: 16) who addresses "the dominant collective patterns in the history of Nordic media research". He identifies five distinct phases, exemplified by key researchers and textbooks, with a more fine-

grained analysis from the 1970s on – and he usefully correlates these phases with dominant media developments of the time. In his conclusion, he notes that over the years, Finland has been more influenced by Marxist orthodoxy than Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, which he sees as more attuned to an "unorthodox combination" of semiology, psychoanalysis, and critical theory of the Frankfurt School bent. In general, he notes that the Nordic countries have exercised particular inflections of trends dominating international media studies, and he takes this to be one of the intellectual benefits of "small countries in the hinterland" (Malmberg, 2018: 24).

A pioneer of Nordic media studies, Kaarle Nordenstreng (2004), has also offered a brief historical overview of Nordic media studies as part of a more general analysis of critical, leftist theorisings in the field. Focusing on institutional developments, he notes that media studies in all Nordic countries straddle social sciences, arts, and humanities, with Finland adding design to its portfolio. Likewise, he observes that journalism studies, together with library and information sciences, mostly occupy separate departments or schools. Nordenstreng cogently takes these trends as a backdrop to discuss the dilemmas between scientific divergence – even fragmentation – of a field and the concurrent institutional success of locating media studies as a discipline. He warns that in tackling these dilemmas, media scholars run the risk of being "professionally self-centred and scientifically shallow" (Nordenstreng, 2004: 13).

Both Malmberg's and Nordenstreng's analyses depart from media studies itself, and they relate its development to international, theoretical trends. But what if we situate the development of Nordic media studies in relation to wider sociocultural formations in the Nordic countries rather than in relation to wider international media-studies communities? Then we may get a somewhat different picture and capture somewhat different options and obstacles for the future of media studies. In the following, I sketch such an alternative picture by correlating the consolidation of Nordic welfarist ideals from the 1970s and 1980s with the institutional consolidation of Nordic media studies. As I hope to demonstrate, this analytical lens offers what may be termed a third route of substantive and institutional development carved out between the binaries that dominate the field if judged by the various ferment issues: administrative versus critical approaches; resistance versus entertainment; quantitative versus qualitative methodologies; and fragmentation versus isolation. This route was paved in the 1970s and 1980s in small countries and small language communities with strong and stable welfare states supporting schools, universities, and public-service media traditions within a political, cultural, and economic climate that was still on the upbeat. What such a contextualised approach may lose in analytical depth yielded by *la longue duree* of internal approaches, it may hopefully gain in offering new perspectives of transformation for international media studies, if not an entirely new map.

Importantly, I speak about media studies – not media and communication studies, or even communication studies. This is because today, *media* – not

communication – is an umbrella term for what most stocktakers address, namely modes of communication that are technologically mediated in ways that can be stored, shaped, and shared across time and space (Thompson, 1995). Similarly, media studies can be seen as an inclusive term covering studies of organisational and (inter)personal communication, both deeply inflected by digital media.

Nordic welfarist ideals

A Nordic model of welfarist ideals forms a crucial underpinning of the particular route taken by media studies in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Even if the word welfare derives from old Norse velferð, the Nordic countries of Europe have no monopoly on welfare states. They come in different shapes in other parts of the world; and social scientists debate the feasibility of specifying empirical typologies such as the ones proposed by the Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (1990), who labels three "welfare regimes": liberal, conservative, and social-democratic. More consensus is found in identifying welfare states as compound concepts that are historically contingent (Edling, 2019) and in defining the Nordic model as being an ideal-type in the Weberian sense, "meaning that no country will embody all the characteristics of this model" (Kautto et al., 2001: 5). This is why I speak about welfarist ideals to stress a conceptualisation of the Nordic model that focuses on widely held assumptions by citizens in the Nordic countries of Europe – assumptions that also have policy and practical effects.

The 1970s – when media studies was institutionalised in the Nordic countries in a major way – mark "a period of consolidation" of Nordic welfare states and welfarist ideals (Kananen, 2014: xi). Redistribution of material resources and relatively low inequities of wealth had become accepted parts of the legal and policy frameworks. In addition, early twentieth-century rights such as universal suffrage and universal education were now part of citizens' expectations. These expectations combined with expansionist economies to enhance citizens' sense of entitlement to partake in and contribute to the public common good. Public institutions were widely valued as being in the service of citizens, and this trust in public value supported publicly funded education, healthcare, and culture. Many civic-society engagements underpinned these notions of trust in a common good and public value as involving rights as well as responsibilities – from sports associations to music clubs.

Of particular relevance to the formation of media studies was an influx in the 1970s of baby boomers to universities and other institutions of tertiary education. Many were first-generation academics in the making, backed by a system of study support and families who could afford to subsidise their children's delayed entry to waged employment. Most young people were free to pick their studies based on personal interest, since few disciplines had any entry limitations. For many in this cohort, a sense of freedom and choice was further energised by libertarian and

socialist movements of the day to resist and transform existing social, sexual, and cultural frameworks. Students in Norway, Iceland, and Finland may have aligned these options of resistance and transformation with anti-imperial sentiments due to their historical experiences with foreign power regimes.

A growing number of students encountered a university system committed to delivering on welfare promises to have education operate as a social lever, yet also lodged into established hierarchies of disciplinary power. Among the results of these encounters were sustained institutional negotiations of what counts as knowledge, societal relevance, and proper didactic approaches. Importantly, these negotiations played out within university systems that were still largely self-governing and not yet in the throes of neoliberal governance and external control. Taken together, these sociocultural trends implied that new disciplines could not only be proposed and tested out, they could also be implemented and institutionally integrated.

The development of Nordic media studies

Media studies was among the disciplines that expanded or were introduced at Nordic universities in the 1970s. Depending on institutional constraints, some built on existing journalism studies, while others on organisational communication studies, sociology, or literary studies. Yet others were invented as independent entities from the outset, happening particularly at newer universities and university colleges. While Malmberg (2018: 23), in his historical overview of Nordic media and communication research, defines the 1970s as "an interlude" (meaning Marxism), he also acknowledges that "media studies as a more or less independent branch of scholarship was established in all Nordic countries by the late 1960s and 1970s".

Likewise, Nordenstreng (2004: 8) notes a dramatic, institutional growth: "The field of media studies has expanded perhaps more than any other academic field apart from computer science and biomedicine". Based on an institutional consolidation of the 1970s and 1980s, most of this expansion happened during the late 1980s and 1990s in tandem with the pervasive mediatisation of societies. Since the Nordic countries were among the early adopters of networked, digital technologies at home, work, and in education, mediatisation also quickly increased calls for professional competences in media and journalism, strategic communication, education, psychology, and counselling, thus catalysing further expansion of media departments.

Commonalities and differences

Apart from similarities in their temporal, institutional expansion, did Nordic media studies have anything in common? Certainly, if judged by the claims made to similarities in the contents of what they researched. Since the 1980s, a number

of special issues and edited volumes have been dedicated to Nordic or Scandinavian specialties in public-service broadcasting, journalism, and film, in addition to particular genres and modes of address to, for example, young audiences (Bondebjerg & Bono, 1996; Carlsson, 1993, 2010; Grøngaard, 1994; Hansen & Waade, 2017; Syvertsen et al., 2014; Syvertsen, & Skogerby, 1998; Søndergaard et al., 1996). Many publications are part of transversal research networks and projects. In most of the publications, the term Nordic or Scandinavian operates as a loose umbrella term for country-by-country analyses or, indeed, as a common denominator of the authors' professional locations. In tandem with these research efforts, the growth in Nordic media studies education also involved defining core curricula; Nordenstreng (2004: 10) claims that the reform of tertiary education after 2001 (the so-called Bologna process) further intensified this process through "defining the disciplinary profile and core elements of each subject".

Did Nordic media studies also share joint approaches, theoretical traditions, or knowledge interests across different empirical themes during its formative years of institutional consolidation? This is the key question of relevance in the present context, and here both the claims-making and the evidence is more selective. In immediate terms, one can point to Nordicom, the Nordic research network of media and communication whose biennial NordMedia conferences since 1973, edited volumes, and journals (many with "Nordic" in the title) have operated as excellent fora of scientific dialogue and debate. An early result of these networking activities was *Current theories in Scandinavian mass communication research*, edited by a mix of Nordic media scholars: Mie Berg, Pertti Hemánus, Jan Ekecrantz, Frans Mortensen, and Preben Sepstrup (Berg et al., 1977). In the 1970s and 1980s, many young media scholars supplemented the knowledge exchange and community-building activities of Nordicom by attending annual summer schools organised by Nordic Summer University. The summer schools brought together (and still do) university students and young faculty across a range of academic backgrounds, thus serving to catalyse interdisciplinary interest and insight. Both Nordicom and Nordic Summer University are subsidised by public funds, and this is indicative of sustained welfarist policies in the domain of Nordic knowledge formation and exchange.

Judged by the output from NordMedia conferences and by personal insight into Norwegian, Swedish, and to a lesser extent, Finnish and Icelandic media research, I would claim that we do see important Nordic similarities during the 1970s and 1980s in terms of approaches, theoretical traditions, and knowledge interests. Having been associated with Norwegian and Swedish universities as adjunct professor and been part of departmental assessment committees over the years, I have observed a number of joint characteristics in Nordic media studies:

- traversing humanities and social science traditions
- attention to historical perspectives on media

- theoretical inflections across French, German, and Anglo-American scholarly traditions
- integration of aesthetic and formal analysis of media content with political, social, and psychological dimensions
- interpretive analysis, including mixed methods spanning qualitative and quantitative approaches
- strong on critical – if not always self-critical – approaches to media in view of wider societal transformations in welfare states

As may be expected, these characteristics are not to be found in every type of output or research result. Rather, they operate at institutional and cross-national levels. Perhaps because all Nordic countries are small language communities, and even large media departments are relatively small in terms of scientific staff, scholars look beyond their national boundaries for theoretical inspiration (and sometimes education, too). Certainly, the 1970s and 1980s saw a constellation of theoretical inputs from beyond the Anglo-American purview. These inputs were developed and transformed within institutional frameworks that would often allow porous boundaries across humanities and social sciences, temporal and structural approaches, and interpretive and numerical analyses.

My analysis differs somewhat from both Malmberg's and Nordenstreng's analyses. This may be because of personal inflections, and it may be because of professional outlook. Certainly, my judgement is coloured by the fact that, beyond media studies departments, I have seen many scholars, projects, and networks beyond media studies "proper" contributing to the formation of Nordic media studies. Some came from anthropology (Berkaak, 1989; Hannerz, 1990), some from education (Østerud, 1989), and some from history (Dahl, 1975). What may have been particular about Nordic media studies is that these perspectives and outlooks were taken seriously for the simple reason that academic communities were limited in numbers and even silos had porous walls.

Still, the list of similarities should not overshadow the fact that the 1970s and 1980s also saw very real oppositions. But these, I would claim, were more pronounced within departments than across national boundaries. For example, there were controversies between journalism and media, film and other media, and critical and more administrative approaches. In retrospect, these controversies may be seen as part of a departmental profiling in an expanding national media studies field – or, should one say, discipline? For while we may speak about media studies as a field in terms of research, it is evident that the consolidation in the 1970s and 1980s made media studies into a distinct discipline in terms of education, if only because of the income it generated (and continues to do) based on student enrolments and exams (Carlsson et al., 2013).

Media studies beyond media studies?

Today, Nordic media studies is a huge success when judged by its institutional and educational position. But, as noted in the introduction, perhaps this success is based on a slippery research foundation if media is disappearing to the skies of surveillance or to the infrastructures of data and algorithmic power. It is at this stage that it may be relevant to look for an answer by revisiting our historical trajectory. For what Nordic media studies documented in its formative years is still true: media continues to be meaning-making technologies that people use to make sense (or not) about the world, themselves, and everything in between. So, interpretive media studies is still relevant when drawing on a range of theoretical approaches and attending to media substance as well as practices of production and usage.

In a NordMedia keynote address in 2002, I proposed "convergent media studies" to address a digitised, globalised, and capitalised media environment. Such convergence, I noted, would involve "intensified cooperation between scholars from the arts (including history, design, linguistics, literary studies), the social sciences (including anthropology and economy) and the natural sciences (inc. soft engineering and interaction design)" (Drotner, 2002: 20). Today, I would argue that media studies must look beyond modes of internal organisation and towards society. Rather than starting with media, we should explore the societal challenges catalysed by "deep mediatization" where "all elements of our social world are intricately related to digital media and their underlying infrastructures" (Hepp, 2019: 5). Importantly, this exploration should address the normative choices involved in tackling these challenges. This is not merely a move towards a non-media-centric approach (Morley, 2008); nor is it a simple return to Lazarsfeld's (1941: 10) critical approach which asks "in what form, however disguised, are [our media of communication] threatening human values". It is, perhaps more radically, a move towards acknowledging particular knowledge interests in looking towards societal challenges when studying media.

It is in working with such normative knowledge interests that the welfarist legacy of Nordic media studies may be of relevance. The welfarist ideals are based on notions of a public common good, as noted above, and underpin public-service media (Syvertsen et al., 2014). But they resonate widely with issues of public value for and with citizens in social, educational, and health policies just as they inflect assumptions in civil society. To attend to normative knowledge interests in the interest of welfarist ideals may impact the kinds of questions we ask in media studies. Naturally, they should not impinge on the answers we provide. Like all scholarship, we must continue to conduct our research with integrity, transparency, and accountability.

Working with an eye to welfarist ideals may serve to widen, not limit, the remit of future media studies. Here, deep mediatisation makes it more relevant than ever to continue studying how people, institutions, and societies make sense

of themselves and generate knowledge, and to do so with the assistance of interpretive, interdisciplinary, and multi-method approaches across macro, meso, and micro dimensions of analysis. Additionally, media studies must deepen its existing attention to the "hidden" dimensions of deep mediatisation: surveillance, data-mining, and what Graham Murdok (2017: 359) calls the "moral economy of machines" with its "raw materials and resources [and] the chains of labor entailed in constructing and maintaining these infrastructures" (see also Bruun & Frandsen, 2019). This widening perspective does not imply a disappearance of media, or of media studies, as claimed by Turow and Couldry (2018). Rather, it gives media studies an added urgency to study a complexifying field with a new ethical tenor.

Note

1. The articles can be retrieved from https://academic.oup.com/joc/issue/33/3

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