

# From Media History to Communication History

## *Three Comparative Perspectives on the Study of Culture*

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### **Looking Back**

Most of the Nordic countries today can boast national histories about most media (for overview, see Bondebjerg, this issue). The available histories allow the authors and the field as such to look back as well as ahead, asking not only 'how well did we do?', but also 'how should we write the second editions?', and even 'will there be such a thing as "media histories," say, 20 years from now'? My presentation focuses on questions concerning such future perspectives (for a review of past research and a research agenda, see Jensen, 1998, 1999a). My argument suggests that if media and communication studies, as a field, do really well, we will not have to write second editions of our *media* histories, but can turn to the writing of *communication* histories. In doing so, we may also advance the interdisciplinary and inclusive study of *culture*.

Compared to the published volumes from several other countries, the history of the Danish media (Jensen, 1996-7) emphasized the inclusion of all media – from books and pamphlets to television and computers – in a synthetic format. On the one hand, this ambition meant that only a certain measure of detail and depth could be provided in the text itself, leaving additional information to be provided in notes, other references, and, not least, future research. On the other hand, the synthetic ambition paved the way for a variety of comparative points – between single media, and between the media and other aspects of culture and society. Similarly, it is a comparative approach which informs this presentation (see also Blumler, McLeod, & Rosengren, 1992; Jensen, 2000 a), and which points beyond the media as such. In outline, the presentation compares:

- national cultures as exemplified by the Nordic countries;
- popular and elite conceptions of culture and media;
- technologically mediated as well as face-to-face communication.

## Comparison Between National Cultures

In the Nordic countries, which are so similar and yet so different, it seems almost inevitable that we should consider comparative studies of media history – the question is how, and at what level of ambition. Most ambitiously, the Nordic region can be seen to constitute a cultural laboratory of sorts, in which the media system of each country may be juxtaposed with those of the rest, and which, in addition, may be compared as a whole with the media environment of other regions in the world. Such analyses could, among other things, serve to qualify reflections on the very category of 'national cultures' at a time when these are often said to be in decline (for overview, see Tomlinson, 1999). More modestly, the various Nordic projects of recent years have identified research questions regarding individual media and genres which lend themselves to comparison between the countries. The examples are legion, from the different and changing structures of the newspaper press to the shifting forms of distribution for popular narratives – print, audiovisual, and digital.

A natural first step is for comparative research to piggyback on existing evidence, performing a secondary analysis of the various national data sets and interpreting findings with reference to a common theoretical framework. For this purpose, case study suggests itself as a model (Gomm, Hammersley, & Foster, 2000; Yin, 1994). Importantly, case studies are not restricted to single events, settings, or organizations, but can be performed of historical periods or nation states, relying on quantitative as well as qualitative methodologies. Moreover, case studies commonly seek to resolve the tension between interpretation and measurement, and between the meanings and the causes of events – a tension which is as familiar in historiography as it is in media and communication research. One application of this general idea has been developed by Charles Ragin (1987; 1994) with reference to the presence or absence of specific social factors in a given period or region, which might explain a particular course of events or the dominance of certain cultural forms.

Most concretely, there is a market, both intellectually and commercially, for a volume which summarizes findings and insights from the Nordic projects for an international audience, and which outlines avenues for further studies. Research interest in historical issues is clearly growing together with the maturity of the field, and there have begun to appear what Paddy Scannell (2000) has called "second-generation histories," addressing questions beyond the basic organization and output of a given medium. A collaborative effort by the Nordic countries would no doubt be appreciated in the international research community at the present juncture, also as an input to theory development in the area, which can be said to lag behind the efforts at documentation. The process of collaboration would, in addition, provide an opportunity for the Nordic research community to compare and discuss, once again, the quite diverse cultures of *research* that have, in part, shaped the media-historical accounts in each national context. National media histories are the product of national research cultures.

## Comparison of 'High' and 'Low' Cultures

Despite attempts to contextualize the analysis of media, the various Nordic histories have, not surprisingly, been informed by the divide between 'high' and 'low' forms of culture. Media histories predominantly cover 'low' culture, or at least the sector and institutions that are responsible for circulating these cultural forms throughout society. This is clear, for instance, in the Danish media history, even while it makes a point of

covering the debate between the two sides of the cultural divide (e.g., Jensen, 1996-97, vol. 3: 56-60). Such a division of labor is far from innocent, and remains to be addressed much more comprehensively, not merely in theoretical terms, but by an empirical effort that would result in an integrative and non-sectarian cultural history.

But, can this be done? And, who could do it? The answer to the first question is that it is already being done on a limited scale. An answer to the second question is that media and communication researchers are perhaps the most natural candidates for the large-scale job. To name two recent examples, Richard Butsch (2000) has written a broad cultural history of American audiences, from popular theater in 1750 to television in 1990, and Michael North (1999) has revisited a wide range of 'high' as well as 'low' publications from the focal year 1922. While 1922 is traditionally thought of as an *annus mirabilis* of western culture because of works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," North demonstrates in detail the varied ways in which such high-cultural masterpieces relate to and resonate with the wider contemporary culture. In particular, he suggests that, contrary to some theories of modernity which argue that high and low varieties of modern culture came to define themselves, above all, in opposition to each other (e.g., Huyssen, 1986), both forms in fact participated in an aestheticization and formalization of both cultural expression and social interaction. In short, selfconscious formalism in high arts can be seen to have much in common with commodified and mechanically reproduced entertainments.

North's home field is literary studies, Butsch is a historian; they represent traditional disciplines looking for stronger interdisciplinary perspectives. So far, media and communication researchers have rarely taken up such invitations in practice, perhaps because the first generation of media researchers had to fight so hard to legitimate their own field of study. (For other attempts at comparing 'art' and 'media,' see, e.g., Pelfrey, 1985; Rush, 1999; Walker, 1994.) It may be time for us to rejoin traditional disciplines after the 'culture wars,' this time as the fugitive field which is welcomed back, if nothing else for providing the better explanatory frameworks.

### **Comparison of 'Mediated' and 'Non-Mediated' Communication**

With the increasing centrality of computer-mediated communication in the media environment as a whole, the field of media research has come full circle, returning to basic questions concerning the similarities and differences between 'mass' and 'interpersonal,' 'mediated' and 'non-mediated' communication. In other contexts, I have suggested that we speak of media of three degrees (Jensen, 1999b; 2000 b):

- *Media of the first degree* – verbal language and other forms of expression which depend on the presence of the human body in local time-space;
- *Media of the second degree* – technically reproduced or enhanced forms of representation and interaction which support communication across space and time, from print to telegraphy and broadcasting;
- *Media of the third degree* – the digitally processed forms of representation and interaction which reproduce and recombine all previous media on a single platform.

The computer helps to suggest a reconceptualization, not just of the current media environment, but of cultural history, as has often been the case with new technologies. The general point was driven home by the first comprehensive history of the idea of commu-

nication, by John Durham Peters (1999), who found that the very notion of communication only became an explicit and problematic category in response to the growth of mediated communication from the late nineteenth century. Other research similarly has suggested how the fundamental categories of time and space were thematized and rearticulated in the decades around 1900, under the influence of new means of communication as well as transportation (e.g., Kern, 1983).

In retrospect, it appears increasingly necessary to return to the sources, not just of media history, but of communication and cultural history in order to account for the specific difference that media technologies make in different periods. The comparison of, for instance, face-to-face conversation and chatroom interaction in both public debate and research, is only the empirical tip of a theoretical iceberg. The nexus between technological media and oral story-telling, which continues to flourish in many cultures and settings (MacDonald, 1998), is a case in point. The book is another medium which, first, was taken for granted as the norm by most traditional scholarship, and which, next, has been largely neglected by media and communication research.

## Looking Ahead

In summary, media and communication research is poised to take a central role in a re-definition of the study of communication and culture. Beyond turf wars with other disciplines, there are good intellectual as well as historical reasons, as outlined here, for taking on this role at present and for exploring new ways of conceptualizing the study of both mediated and non-mediated communication. Together, these communicative practices are sedimented both as aesthetic artefacts and as ways of life – as culture in a descriptive and non-denominational sense, and with important variations across nation states. In addition to interdisciplinary theory development, such an enterprise will require new institutional frameworks, probably a reformation of the university and the establishment of Faculties of Media, Communication, and Culture (Jensen, 2000).

In the short term, then, the field is likely to witness interesting comparative spin-offs from the projects in Nordic media history. In the slightly longer term, the field has an opportunity to revisit its source disciplines, and to reassert an expanded, democratized concept of culture, also in the context of historical studies. In the long term, I suggest that we will have move definitively beyond media history, to communication history, in order to produce a record of how diverse communicative practices accumulate as culture.

Presumably, we can look forward to visiting Iceland again for a Nordic research conference in the year 2021. For that event, I propose a session taking stock of *communication* history.

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