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National, global, regional – where is the core of the Nordic communication research?

Communication and media research in the Nordic countries speaks with multiple voices. In our particular field it is self-evident to frame research on the national and local level – even at this time of globalisation. We participate in social development at home, but we are also increasingly aware of our institutions expecting us to internationalise, to present ourselves in various international and global arenas. This is challenging, as the questions we pose on the international arenas are typically different from those raised on the home front.

There is also a third arena: the regional. This has been quite concrete in the Nordic countries since the early 1970s. Nordicom was established in 1972 to carry out documentation of Nordic research in the field, and the Nordic conferences on media and communication began in 1973 as a platform for scholarly presentations and networking among media and communication researchers in the five Nordic countries. The Nordic conferences have since been arranged every second year with a growing number of participants and Nordicom has expanded from documentation to publications and research coordination.

There were three grounds for establishing Nordicom – national, regional and global. First, it reflected the rapid rise of mass communication research in the 1970 in all the Nordic countries – especially in Sweden, Denmark and Finland – each of which had scholarly traditions in the field at least since the 1960s. Second, Nordicom was another Nordic institution with a socio-cultural niche, deliberately promoted by the Nordic Council (through the Nordic Cultural Fund) at the time when the political agenda was dominated by NORDEK (a project for Nordic economic union) rather than EEC or EU. Third, Nordicom got global support from Unesco, which since the early 1970s was pushing for communication research especially through regional centres (Nordenstreng 1976, 118). Actually Unesco began to coordinate a worldwide network of communication research documentation centres, known at the time as COMNET, with a joint thesaurus and criteria for

gathering and classifying material (*ibid.*, 122-126). Nordicom was an active member of that network, which unfortunately did not survive beyond the 1970s, due to Unesco's changing priorities. Today, Nordicom and the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (Amic) in Singapore are the only surviving regional centres from that grand design.

Nordicom's books and journals typically include researchers from several Nordic countries, suggesting that they have something in common. It is fair to say – or at least to hypothesise – that our voices share a distinct Nordic tone different from the dominant Anglo-American literature. We have a chicken-and-egg problem here: is it the case that the Nordicness embedded in us all has promoted Nordicom, or have we Nordic scholars found our Nordicness due to infrastructural support from Nordicom? Obviously it is both.

Nordicness – something special

We Nordic scholars seem to have something in common – but what is it? Ulla Carlsson (2007, 280) enumerates certain common denominators of the Nordic countries in this field:

All share long traditions of public service broadcasting, both radio and television; strong newspaper industries at regional and local levels; long traditions of protecting freedom of expression and freedom of the press in law; and early development of the ICT. Nearly everyone has access to mobile telephony; and 80 per cent have internet access; newspaper reading continues to be widespread and frequent; a handful of large media companies dominate television production and newspaper and book publishing. Nor should we underestimate the advantage of some degree of understanding of each other's languages, albeit far from universal.

Beyond these concrete elements there are deep structures that unite us. One reason for the exceptionally strong and many-sided interest in the media in the Nordic countries is no doubt the long tradition of mass literacy. For centuries, the Lutheran church allowed nobody to get married without a reading test. However, literacy research is ambivalent about the effects of the long literacy tradition. On the one hand, literacy has enabled the Nordic peoples to gather information beyond our own limited experiences. On the

other, Nordic literacy was long the ability to read and, according to some researchers, this has predisposed us to obey orders and respect authorities.

Later, of course, obedience was not enough. Democratic development led to an increasingly deliberative political culture and the media were supposed to provide arenas for discussion and debate. This is a “forum function” of the media, in addition to functions of informing and criticizing, which typically is seen to be a central task of media in these societies. For example, state subsidies to the press are taken for granted as a way to ensure diversity of voices – something that is unthinkable in Anglo-American media policies. And an outside observer, Denis McQuail (2008), for his part lists Scandinavia as one of few homes of a communication research school in Western Europe, next to the Francophone, the British, the German and the Mediterranean schools. He also notes: “Smaller countries were not necessarily backward in developing the field of communication and some, such as Holland, Belgium, Switzerland, and Finland, took leading positions.”

It is customary to think that there does indeed exist a Nordic model – in social systems in general and media systems in particular – based on such principal elements as those listed above. For example, Nordicom’s summary of media trends in the Nordic countries (Flisen & Harrie 2008) takes a Nordic model for granted, while also reviewing current challenges to it, notably the European Commission’s questioning of the state subsidies as something that does not belong to free common market. A good overview is provided by Anker Brink Lund (2007, 131):

To sum up, there are many political and economic indications that Hallin and Mancini (2004, 143-197) are correct in attributing common traits to the Nordic media systems. But no single common regional media order dominates. No uniform Scandinavian media model exists in spite of the fact that Denmark, Norway and Sweden share many common traits, e.g. self-regulated journalism and politically regulated media markets based on political compromises.

Accordingly, while the Nordic media have a lot in common, it is a matter or dispute – or definition – whether a Nordic media model really exists. In any case our starting point is that there is a Nordic community based on a variety of elements: on a common but varied history, on a common but varied scope of cultures, but perhaps above all on similar social ideals. We are used to call them as the welfare state ideology. With all this we have so

much in common that it is natural and rewarding to debate and joke about our differences.

Communication research since the early 1990s has abounded in rhetoric about media and democracy. We do not perhaps shout about it as loudly as many others, because the values of equality and democracy are a natural part of our intellectual climate. This does not mean that our societies are perfect, far from it, but we do not challenge the basics of the welfare state ideology.

All in all, one often realizes in international conferences how another Nordic colleague articulates his or her thoughts in a way similar to one's own. There is no way to gather proof of kind of hazy togetherness, yet it exists. Perhaps it is the long joint history we share – with the exception of Iceland, it is in fact Swedish history we all carry with us today. The Finnish part is the longest: we have over 600 years of shared history with Sweden (1150-1809), leaving us with many shared poles of identity, the Swedish language being just one of them. They have shaped the way we perceive the world today. Iceland's position is more complex and mediated, but elements of the joint history have found their way across the Atlantic as well.

Dissidents – part of us

For us Finns, the situation is obviously more complex than for others due to our very different language. Actually, Nordicness has been a problem for most Finnish-speaking Finns, while for the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland (about six per cent of the population) it is natural to belong to the Scandinavian-speaking community. No doubt the path to the Nordic community of media researchers has been more difficult for the Finnish-speaking Finns than for the others. With their school Swedish, the Finn-Finns barely survive in a Scandinavian-speaking environment, and the fast-speaking Danes even raise fear.

The decades from the beginning of the research networking have not been plain sailing. In the 1970s and 1980s, the Nordic neighbours first appeared for many Finns to be too close to attract attention, also remaining behind a language curtain. They rather headed to English-speaking arenas and also looked to the neighbours in the East – to the Soviets and East/Central Europeans – as well as to the South of the developing world. The Danes perhaps felt the same way with the continental European arenas which were often more attractive for them than the Nordic sphere.

Also for the Finnish-speaking population at large Nordicness has remained an abstract idea as shown for example by feasibility studies of a joint Nordic satellite television NORDSAT. Yet the bottom line of Finnish national consciousness holds quite strong ties to the Nordic family, as shown by the fact that when asked where they would move if forced to leave Finland, an overwhelming majority chooses Sweden.

There is indeed a community of interest among Nordic media researchers, perhaps via the fact that on the arenas outside the Nordic sphere we have found that we feel as being “different” in the same way. The lines of thinking among the Nordic scholars go closer than between us and, say, many American researchers. Being dissidents in the wider world has served to unite us.

In recent years, young Nordic researchers have been able to have a real say via their own networks thanks to various Nordic summer schools for doctoral students. For them, it is natural to keep contact with colleagues in other Nordic countries, often through the medium of English but forming a variety of research networks and groups. Again, we meet the chicken-and-egg problem here. Have the young researchers found each other thanks to the doctoral courses, or have the courses nourished something that was always there?

In any case, the Nordic doctoral candidates resist the Anglo-American tendency to put PhD students into the basket of “junior scholars”. In our circles, doctoral students are already professional researchers. They perhaps receive their PhD somewhat later than their counterparts in the English-speaking world – our ministries of education tend to be concerned exactly about this fact – but their credentials are also considerably higher. They are not students but professionals. Their research is far more independent, and they are often already qualified teachers. This is something that tends to be forgotten in official documents comparing Nordic doctoral students with those in other EU countries or the US.

Nordicom – lifeline of scholarship

The joint infrastructures, above all Nordicom and the regular Nordic conferences, have grown stronger since the 1970s. We have had arenas which are easily open and which even welcome us – Nordicom and its soul Ulla Carlsson have throughout the decades exercised a carrot and stick policy to

encourage us to be Nordics, to publish in Nordicom books and journals and to participate in Nordic research groups.

The role of Nordicom publications is crucial. It is difficult to think how things would be without them. We all live in a world of publish or perish. Nordicom's publishing channels are close to us and offer us a natural high quality choice. Practically all young Nordic media and communication researchers have started their publication careers with articles in the Nordicom journals. And these journals have opened new doors: for example, *Nordicom Review* is by circulation undoubtedly one of the most widely distributed academic journals in our field.

Unfortunately, none of the numerous evaluation exercises that Nordicom has been forced to undergo has properly addressed this dimension of the activity. Nordicom journals and books have exercised an alert publication strategy, a research agenda that deserves admiration.

Equally important is the natural tie to the global research sphere. Ulla Carlsson has accepted book proposals with an emphasis on "weak signals", themes that are just arriving on the global research agenda. Sometimes she has gently alerted Nordic professionals to such areas which she has found relevant and worth attention. Public Service Broadcasting has been an important ingredient in the Nordicom publication lists throughout the years; it is an example of our welfare state ideology. But there are many other examples of alertness: Nordicom has provided a channel for early considerations around "us" and "them", about global/local and time/space, about new forms in conflict reporting, about news transmission in the age of globalisation, as well as problems in development communication, Ulla Carlsson's own special interest area.

The Nordicom publications have strengthened genuine Nordicness in the sense that researchers from at least two countries should always be included in a Nordicom publication, and the potential for ego trips is curbed by the fact that monographs are not accepted. Nordicom publications aim at presenting a diversity of voices. The editorial policy has gradually gained strength. First the journals were not refereed, but when the critical mass of competent authors grew, a referee policy was introduced. Nordicom offers translation assistance, but today the editorial scrutiny is also rigorous. Today we are treated as mature, competent and responsible authors.

The connection between the global and the regional is not without problems. An example of this is the case of the birth of The International

Clearinghouse on Children, Youth and Media, an integral part of Nordicom activity today. The initiative came from Unesco and its member state Sweden. The UN organisation for education, science and culture initially also provided financial support for the study of the youth and the media. Nordicom took up the challenge and established the Clearinghouse – and was soon compelled to assume full responsibility. One might think that such a global organisation as Unesco would stand for stability and long-term planning, but not in this case. The concern about youth came as a flash from the global level, which soon turned its interests to other – perhaps equally relevant – themes. It was the regional organisation Nordicom which was able to organise the idea into continuous surveying, documentation and publishing, focusing on both the global and the regional markets. We can claim that the core of the above-mentioned welfare ideology provided the ideological support for the exercise, and Nordicom's established status in the national circle made it possible to obtain financial support for the idea. The regional organisation took up the challenge, cherishing its own values.

So what?

There is no need to idealise the Nordic community of communication research. There are contradictions embedded in it, and if it became too strong, it could become counterproductive and cause us to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world. But as it is today, it is no doubt able to give us support in our ventures beyond the Nordic countries. And wherever we go, we are already somehow known, thanks to the rich and many-sided publication profile of Nordicom.

To quote again Anker Brink Lund (2007, 132):

In short, political economy research questions the very existence of the democratic-corporate model of Scandinavia in order to understand the specific conditions of local players and their institutional competitiveness in global games. There is little doubt that many common commercial and political characteristics exist throughout the regional media market constituted by Denmark, Norway and Sweden. But these similarities cannot be properly understood without carefully calibrated comparative designs, considering not only global mega-trends, but also the diverging forces that constitute the national media markets in a Scandinavian context.

The motto of EU is “unity in diversity”. The European political arenas – the EU as well as the Council of Europe – have recently emphasized the idea of territory-based communities as well as communities of interest as demonstrated by the European Parliament’s resolution on community media. Europeaness is to be found no longer via uniformity alone but also via multiplicity, diversity and closeness. The political organs have got wind of an idea that the Nordics have been active on for quite a while.

In his attempt to define the Europeanisation of communication and media studies, Nico Carpentier (2009) talks about the dynamics between coherence and fragmentation, between diversity and unity, but he stresses that intensified Europeanisation should not be uncritically accepted. It easily leads to homogenisation and stops a search for alternative approaches, especially today when the celebrative approach is circled by globalisation.

Ideally thinking, a combination of coherence and fragmentation sounds as the answer for us Nordics as well. Roland Robertson’s (1995) concept of glocalisation is well known – an aim to theorise the local conceptualisations of the global. But to our circumstances a perhaps better sitting concept is Arjun Appadurai’s (1995) translocalisation. Translocalisation is viewed as the mirror for glocalisation’s image. In it, the local is the starting point of departure, adding the global – in the Nordic case the European, the global, the universal – as a second component. Carpentier (2009, 318) continues his reflections about Appadurai’s considerations in a way that fits well to our Nordic scholarship:

At the level of academic practices and institutions, the translocalisation of the discipline refers to the ways that always-specific, contextualised and situated knowledge and practices can transcend local boundaries and enter into intellectual interactions without losing their contextual affinities and situatedness.

Oscillations between coherence and fragmentation are and should be a natural part of our Nordicness – not a problem to be solved but a challenge to be continually used as intellectual stimulation.

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