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Kaarle NORDENSTRENG

Media Scholar Between Science and Politics

This is a case of a son of the intellectual climate of the 1960s. As is well known, at that time it was fashionable to think that everything is political and that power struggle goes on at all levels of social life -- not least in media, culture and science. The mainstream tradition of logical positivism was typically seen as a brand of bourgeois (i.e. wrong) scholarship, which creates an illusion of objective reality around a bastion of class-based forces. Countering this was the progressive and critical scholarship, based on an anti-hegemonistic approach to power structures and insisting that science and politics are interconnected -- indeed, are part and parcel of a single social process, as taught by dialectical and historical materialism.

I happened to enter the field of communication research under those climatic conditions. My basic education (psychology of perception and phonetics) was most apolitical, but my work place (research and long-range planning unit of the Finnish Broadcasting Company) turned out to be one of the most politically heated spots in that society. In this environment the American-dominated mass communication research was not only something to be learned and applied but also something to be criticized (NORDENSTRENG, 1968).

I can deliver personal testimonies of how critical research and related policy was done in Finland in the late 1960s and early 1970s, first in broadcasting (NORDENSTRENG, 1974) and then in press (NORDENSTRENG & WIIO, 1979). Moreover, I can proceed to the international level, first Unesco (NORDENSTRENG, 1984) and then international movement of journalists (NORDENSTRENG & TOPUZ, 1989).

On this basis my conclusion today is that all this was justified at the time and that it constitutes a healthy element in the long evolutionary process, both in terms of societal development in general and the growth of science in particular. Thus I am convinced that critical and

radical scholarship will occupy a highly valued place in the final history of ideas of this century.

As an excursion to the history of ideas in the communication field, I recently examined the relationship between critical scholarship and the so-called New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) -- two tracks of a historical movement: intellectual and political (NORDENSTRENG, 1993). I traced four crucial aspects which were common to both sides:

- Holistic view of the world with communication as an integral part of it, whereby communication and power are inseparable and media are seen as an omnipotent factor in society -- in good and bad.
- Equality as an overriding value both within society and between nations, whereby imbalance and domination should be countered and pluralism and equal opportunity should be guaranteed -- not just in principle (as libertarians do) but also in actual practice (as social liberals do).
- Objective truth as an ultimate aim of mass communication, based on epistemological realism (common to both bourgeois and Marxist traditions), whereby it is justified to speak about right and false consciousness and about its manipulation by the media.
- Normative approach to reality, where at issue are not only supposedly value-free empirical observations but also ethical and ideological positions.

With such components central to both the intellectual and the political tracks of the movement, each growing out of its own roots, it was natural that the two tracks at some point met and created a mix in which it is difficult to tell where science ends and politics begins. It was a typical case of paradigms merging. And essentially the same case could be made by exposing the national histories of broadcasting or press research and policy (NORDENSTRENG, 1977).

In hindsight, it strikes me how independent the intellectual and political tracks first were, although in the final analysis both were no doubt constituted by the same overall socio-historical development. But in such a paradigmatic light it makes a great sense that communication scholarship at the time was dominated not only by a holistic world view but also by a policy orientation, with a sharp anti-positivistic bias rejecting the traditional distinction between "is" and

"ought to be" (NORDENSTRENG, 1973; 1976). And it makes a great sense that this merger was so rapid and visible precisely in the field of mass communication, which by its very nature is highly political.

However, this history of ideas provides us with another lesson, which is even more intriguing: the paradox that politicization beyond a certain level turns from a creative ferment into a repressive paralyzer. The case of international communication scholarship is again particularly illuminating (NORDENSTRENG, 1992; 1993). First, for example in Unesco, media were approached with a critical paradigm, calling for social relevance rather than methodological sophistication, i.e. politicization. Then, just when such a policy orientation had gained momentum and the message of critical scholars was picked up by crucial forces of the international community (the Non-Aligned Movement of the developing countries as well as the East-West constellation behind detente), politics became so dominant that science could no longer find proper breathing space for itself -- it became a hostage of overpoliticization.

In my reflexions on the delicate relationship between the intellectual and political tracks of international communication (NORDENSTRENG, 1993, 252-254), I first of all admit that all social phenomena are political by their nature and that in this sense it is misleading to suggest that a truly scientific study of social communication ever could be free from political implications. Then I point out that high politics may impose a restrictive influence upon the intellectual sphere in two respects: (1) the political forces interfere directly in the intellectual inquiry by institutional moves such as adjusting resources in accordance with the prevailing political balance, typically curtailing anti-hegemonistic progressive scholarship; and (2) the political atmosphere indirectly influences scholarship through political conflicts and controversies, dominating the intellectual sphere so that the analytical arsenal runs the risk of being reduced to a copy of political power configurations.

The latter syndrome was commonly associated with the Cold War, whereby the East-West conflict was so dominant that it hardly left any intellectual space for other considerations beyond perpetuation of controversies such as freedom vs. censorship. The end of the Cold War gave rise to a hope for releasing a lot of intellectual potential arrested by political expediency -- in both camps. However, the past few years have not been particularly promising, beginning with the perse-

cution mentality against those in any way associated with the old socialist regimes (including those reformers who were instrumental in bringing them down) and ending up with the sale of mediocre neo-liberalism to the new free market in Eastern Europe.

My conclusion in the 1993 article was that overpoliticization can indeed be a risk for a sound and creative intellectual movement. In addressing the Colloquium in 1994 I went on by warning that a media scholar, operating in the contagious terrain between science and politics, should keep critical distance to both. In other words, I saw an ideal media scholar as a dialogical partner in relation to social practice -- in a similar way that an anthropologist approaches his/her object.

And I elaborated: If we want to follow the good old advice of Karl Marx and not just philosophize about the world but go and change it, the way to do it today is not to get too much involved in dirty politics. This unorthodox position was based on the historical experience that media scholars cannot after all make a big difference in the barricades of the day, but that their contribution can make a great deal of difference by influencing the intellectual orientation of the real political forces and operators in society -- through a long-term and indirect influence on the paradigms held in society rather than a direct intervention in the policy process. Such a perspective seemed to be particularly true under the confusing conditions of contemporary information society.

After sleeping several nights since the Colloquium, I still stick to that provocative position. But I have to qualify that time seems to be ripe for another shift of emphasis, now calling for more attention to the structures and practices of democracy, particularly at the community level. For a media scholar this means to join the drive for "public journalism" (ROSEN, 1994). This new movement, also known as "civic journalism", is based on the conviction that what we lack is not information but democracy and that journalists and the media have high time to distance themselves from political elites and their spectacles; instead, journalists should get closer to real people, their communities and their concerns.

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