

Manifesto for transformist media scholars **A multivocal chorus for troubled times**

Susana Tosca¹ & Sara Mosberg Iversen²

In collaboration with Afroditi Koulaxi, Anette Grønning, Daniel Lundgaard, Ea Christina Valentin Willumsen, Emily Cousins, Eva Pina Myrczik, Henrik Bødker, Jochen Karl Kinast, Julie Meise Münster Lassen, Maja Klausen, Martina Skrubbeltrang Mahnke, Meri-Maaria Frig, Pernille Almlund, Renée Ridgway, Salla-Maaria Laaksonen, Sandra Simonsen, Steffen Moestrup, Stinne Gunder Strøm Krogager, Tem Frank Andersen, Thomas Enemark Lundtofte, & Yasamin Molana.

1. Department of Design, Media and Educational Science, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark, stosca@sdu.dk

2. Department of Design, Media and Educational Science, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark, siv@sdu.dk

What you are about to read is an invitation to reflect about the role of media scholars (and media) in contemporary society. The tone is purposefully poetic, even playful. The form is dialogic, that is, not a unified academic argument, but a collection of different voices that are allowed to stand side by side, agreeing and disagreeing. This is a declaration and an experiment in alternative modes of writing. It should appeal to each of you in different ways, attract and repel, bore and inspire. More context and theoretical considerations are provided at the end. Skip there if you need it up front.

Beginnings

Can, may, might media scholars be utopic activists? Said one media scholar to another, wishing, but doubting. *Hopefully, let's ask the others*, was the response. *Maybe we're not alone*. So, they asked. In the form of a workshop: "The media scholar as (utopic) activist?" One April morning, during the SMiD (Association of Media and Communication Researchers in Denmark) 2024 conference, around 35 Danish and international media scholars came together to think and talk. Together, they explored the potential of the utopic method (Levitas, 2013) to scaffold reflections about the present and ground the activist impulses of those gathered.

The collective considerations ended up with declarations like:

"Pursue dialogue with the companies, regulate the big tech, push back responsibility from the individual (or murder, shame, and dialogue)."

And: "Infiltrate Taylor Swift, make her promote sustainable consumption."

There was a sense of elation. Of relief. Was there really something they all could do beyond pointing to what is wrong? It was great to talk about dreams and desires. About the things that really matter. The conditions they all wanted to do something about.

It was agreed they would make a manifesto. In dialogue. Pluralistic. Not necessarily streamlined. Seven sentences were wrought from the collective work. Were put forth as suggestions. Voices answered. Weaving into, around one another. Widening. Disagreeing. Emphasising. Nuancing. Doubting. Dreaming. Looking for the cracks and gaps where the utopic can emerge. Momentarily. Small slivers of hope.

A manifesto of sorts

Here are seven statements. Thrown like stones. Followed by some of the ripples they caused in the water when other voices replied. Not coherently, expertly, neat. But human voices, nonetheless, in all their difference and imperfection. You can join the chorus. What would your voice contribute?

1. Reject dehumanising ontologies

"This is a strong introduction. It positions the manifesto in contrast to some tech- and natural sciences, where this is almost exactly the point (right? Reducing people to numbers). Perhaps we should be clear about the 'domain' of our manifesto." (One voice)

"I find it necessary in today's world with more than one war. We must all remember to stay curious and open-minded. I actually believe the media has great responsibility in avoiding repetition and reproduction of prejudice." (Another voice)

"I think this is absolutely true in terms of countering big tech. We cannot lose the human out of sight and we cannot accept paradigms that put systems into the centre. Humans need to work together with systems but in the end, it'll always be humans having responsibility." (Yet another voice)

"This is super important – and I also think it's really important that we go further, i.e., not only reject dehumanising ontologies, but also deliberately *include* diverse voices in media research, especially those that often face dehumanisation. I guess this links to the last point about revitalising qualitative ways of knowing ..." (Yet again another voice)

2. Resist individualisation

"We are constantly being evaluated as individuals, even though science is a collective endeavor and so are our lives and realities too. Mention and thank those who helped you, give honor to those who deserve it." (One voice)

"I'm not really sure what this means within the context of media research."
(Another voice)

"Yes and no. People are individual to start with and they need to be. However, they also need to function in a group. For media and communication research it's important to balance individual with collective views."
(Yet another voice)

"I wish we as scholars were part of a system that supported and merited collective endeavours. This publication is a collective endeavour (that is, if it will get published – maybe we can't find an outlet, because academic journals won't know how to handle this number of authors or this genre of publication). I like this headless movement and think it has great value. We are mobilising a 'we', not one scholar, professor, researcher. As researchers we're constantly measured and asked to perform our personal 'academic brand' in research publications, mainstream media, social media, vis-a-vis our colleagues, leaders, students. We are in competition with each other for funding, recognition, quotations,

first- or second authorships, H-indexes, etc. Every time we get an opportunity to mobilise other ways of being in our work lives we should dare to go there, and to resist and counterbalance the multiple ways we are asked to individualise as part of being an academic. Tell the stories about research collectives or share authorship with everyone involved in knowledge production. Through assembling in collectives and by articulating and materialising other ways of being and becoming within academia we could point out a line of flight, to think with Deleuze and Guattari.”

(Yet again another voice)

“I wish I knew what to do. I believe individualisation entails so much that is problematic in society: from anxiety among youth over work-related stress to too little kindness and care for other people.”

(Yet again, again another voice)

3. Regulate big tech

“... and support the users. Regulation is important but the user needs to be part of the regulation process. Media and communication research needs to produce much more information about the user that feeds into regulation.”

(One voice)

“This is an ambitious statement (knowing the origin of the discussion), but it looks completely ‘flat’ when no details are given. Regulate what?”

(Another voice)

“This one feels a bit hopeless. Media scholars are often not heard when regulation is decided. Like how now politicians are discussing social media bans against all the nuance from media research, so they are avoiding to actually hold big tech accountable, instead pushing the problem down onto the citizens.”

(Yet another voice)

“Not only regulate but also resist: find alternatives, seek open source platforms and tools, think of ways doing things differently requires some extra work and thinking but might pay off in the end and broaden the horizon.”

(Yet again another voice)

4. Ruin growth ideologies

“Growth in itself is not bad but needs to be in accordance with other factors, such as the environment.”

(One voice)

“Especially in media industries. I think that better media could be about weaving together all the fragmentations we are suffering. We do not need more media, we need better media.”

(Another voice)

“We need this more than anything else. YouTube and TikTok is not yet available on Mars, and we are heading for Mars if we do not change our ‘growth is God’ behaviour.”

(Yet another voice)

“I associate growth with pace and acceleration. We need a deceleration, as Rosa points out writing about ‘islands of deacceleration’ (though he’s very vague in where and how we might find these islands). We need to promote and to learn how to be in and think with slowness. In LOTR Frodo tells Sam ‘we have lingered here too long’ as they make their way through the rocky passes of Eryn Mui. I think we as media researchers actually need to do the exact opposite – we should linger much, much longer than we do. Dare to dwell on ideas and create lasting frameworks of thought that do not just apply to the latest technological thingy. Amanda Lagerkvist advocates for slowness in her existential media theory. She emphasises the importance of slowing down research processes to deeply engage with the subjects of study. Slowing down, lingering, might allow us to better understand and ethically engage with the complexities of life and the existential dilemmas of digital existence. If we practice dwelling and slowness instead of growth and production, we can challenge the norms of speed and quantity. We might also practice silence and waiting over rapid analysis, as Lagerkvist points out, and in this perhaps become more skilful at listening to our data.”

(Yet again another voice)

“Point out ideologies, point out the cultural circuit of capitalism as it is generated in texts, in the media, in our universities.”

(Yet again, again another voice)

5. Raise up safe spaces for community and reflection

“I think safe spaces are being ‘raised’ all the time, the challenge lies in maintaining them beyond a moment in time – like this workshop, for example. I suggest we add and ‘maintain.’”

(One voice)

“Such spaces might be available online, but I think we should care more about physical co-presence.”

(Another voice)

“Cherish stupidity. Doing research is about feeling stupid and embracing it. That is how we build new knowledge: by feeling stupid and clueless in front of a new question. So we also need more stupid questions. Sometimes anonymity helps with that.”

(Yet another voice)

“We should be trained to dare more, to be more courageous – it should be part of our mentoring, scholarly training. We, ourselves, are also part of the problem when we hide or run away from an important discussion for the future society.”

(Yet again another voice)

“Really like this one, though it feels as though there are two key ideas in this statement – platforming voices and also ensuring there are places for academic debate and disagreement, that are respectful, safe, and curious.”

(Yet again, again another voice)

6. Repurpose the tools of Capitalism against Capitalism

“I really agree with the end goal of deconstructing capitalism, but I’m not sure about taking this approach. I think of Audre Lorde: ‘For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.’”

(One voice)

“These seems to be statement from some sixties left-wing movement. I think we need to move and accept the state of the world as it is. Let’s drop names such as Capitalism and focus on how to make a better world.”

(Another voice)

“I think that the nature of those tools is such that it ends up infecting and transforming everyone that wields them, like the one ring. I think that it is a tragedy that I cannot even imagine how it would look like without those tools.”

(Yet another voice)

7. Revitalise qualitative ways of knowing

“‘ways of knowing’ reads a bit... empty to me. It’s about more than the ways of knowing – it’s about the insights we gain through qualitative methods that are currently being neglected because of the love for big data. It’s about the problematic, dehumanising perspective on the world that is currently being fostered through the fixation on ‘hard data’. I wish we could end on a note that brings back the human into research, without implying it in the qualitative methods and their ways.”

(One voice)

“Ask the scholars (us) how we can bring our results into policy level – create workshops with stakeholders (patients, relatives, health professionals, etc.) to design research projects before applying for grants. Work locally with municipalities and local politicians, NGOs, and other key representatives from the given context. Work with local media to get other stories into the public debate on a local level and based on that, on a national level to create change.”

(Another voice)

“Numbers are not enough for deep understanding.”

(Yet another voice)

The manifesto turned into call and response. Seven statements and some of the thoughts, the words intoned by a chorus of media scholars. *But these responses are not utopic*, you may say. The utopic is in the exchange, the plurality of voices. In what can grow from the cracks.

It would perhaps be more simple, more elegant to just offer the seven statements. But much more happens once other voices are allowed to complicate matters. Now add actions. What can we do? What happens when the media scholars’ research and actions complicate matters?

Finally, some context

This text has been created in several phases and is meant as a poetic comment and a basis for debate about the role of Danish media and communication scholars today. The intention is not to provide any perfect or univocal answers, but, rather, to ask questions and reflect together, however messy that may turn out. As those who initiated the work, Tosca and Iversen, can be considered as conductors of a wilful, chaotic, and, yet, partly aligned ensemble. Please note that the voices quoted above have been randomly assigned a designation. An utterance marked as “one voice” in one part of the text, does not necessarily have the same origin as another utterance given the same designation later in the text. This is intentional. We find in this case, and agreed so with the participants, that it is not important who said what. Rather, it is the exchange and the variety of expressions that should be at the centre. Below, we situate this text to aid the reader’s sense-making process.

The initial workshop

Do media scholars have dreams of transformation for the current media landscape? And if so, what might those be? Recent theorising about the utopic was the foundation for the

one-and-a-quarter-hour-long workshop, “The media scholar as (utopic) activist?” We took particular inspiration from Ruth Levitas (2013), who envisions the utopic as,

the expression of desire for a better way of living and of being. This analytic rather than descriptive definition reveals the utopian aspects of forms of cultural expression rather than creating a binary separation between utopia/non-utopia. It allows that utopia may be fragmentary, fleeting, elusive. It mirrors an existential quest which is figured in literature, music, drama and art. (Levitas, 2013, p. 4)

Importantly, these desires for something better should not take the form of blueprints for the perfect future, as totalitarianism ultimately lays that way (Garforth, 2009). Instead, we follow Lisa Garforth (2009) in understanding the utopic as always in process, incomplete, and fragmented. As something that is enacted in pockets of resistance and activism.

The workshop was designed in three stages, following Levitas’s notion of utopic method. Firstly, there was an archaeological phase (Levitas, 2013), which consists of “digging into” the past and existing conditions. We asked the participants, who worked in groups, to:

“1) Consider individually:

Which (for society) problematic values are explicitly or implicitly embodied/invoked in the current media landscape or within the domain you research?

2) Discuss together:

Which of these conditions are so problematic and vital that you’d consider (or already do) engage with them activistically?

3) Decide together which one of these problems you’ll work with during the next phases.”

The next stage, the ontological (Levitas, 2013), is concerned with examining what kind of identities, practices, and societies the past or existing order (examined during the first stage) constitute. We told the participants:

“Work together with the problem you chose in the previous phase and discuss:

What kind of subjects, practices, societies does this problem create here and now – and perhaps in the future?”

The third stage, the architectonic (Levitas, 2013), focuses on building something new. Here we instructed the participants to:

“Imagine together what the ultimate solution/handling of the problem could look like. It does not have to be possible, realistic or practical. Use your imagination.

If you've got time, you can even consider whether elements of this speculative and ideal solution can be executed here and now in small (and large) disturbances of the existing, practice changes, etc.

Finish by formulating a short call to action: Do more..., don't do..., we want to..., it's necessary to..., etc."

Finally, we spent some time hearing from each group and conversing all together. Interestingly, although the groups discussed a variety of topics, the directions their thinking took were, to a great degree, similar. The seven statements above are based on the work carried out by the groups during the workshop, not the least their calls to action. The voices that comment on, discuss, or challenge the statements stem from a subsequent experiment with asynchronous, prompted, collaborative writing.

The writing experiment

During autumn 2024, everyone who participated in the workshop was invited to participate in a collaborative writing experiment as a follow-up to the workshop. At an initial online meeting where 17 people participated, various formats of asynchronous, collaborative writing were discussed. For instance, sending weekly prompts out via social network media. In the end, we devised a simpler setup. The seven statements were shared with those who expressed interest with an invitation to react in writing to as few or many as they wanted. Nine people participated and the result of this exchange of thoughts, challenges, and insights can be read above. We have tried to give the exchange a poetic and interesting form. Whether the result is thought-provoking is up to you, the reader, to decide.

A note on manifesto writing as a method

Manifesto writing can act as a tonic to counter stagnation – it can generate radical new ideas by freeing us from the confines of careful speech and complacency in times of crisis. Where there is a need for urgent action and a dramatic change of course, there is a need for manifestos. (Hanna & Ashby, 2022, p. 23-24)

Manifesto writing allows scholars to break free from the burden of unemotional and impartial expression. It certainly did that for us, offering a license to express powerful emotions. This does not mean we seek to replace traditional scholarly work and expression, but rather to expand the range of acceptable academic interventions, incorporating different forms of intellectual engagement. Despite this potential, manifesto writing remains an underutilised method in academia, perhaps due to its unpredictability and its perceived "unscientific" nature. In fact, it stands in stark contrast to the conventions of traditional academic language (Ashby et al., 2017). Yet, this very difference is its strength, we are convinced.

Manifestos emerge from interaction-based processes, making them uniquely suited for integrating a plurality of voices. As Senabre et al. argue, they constitute “a performative textual and narrative format that can bridge scholarly and expert knowledge with wider audiences as an outreach strategy” (2022, p. 2). Even more significantly, they are “less about measurable change than about imagined effects and about reconceived communities” (Davis & Morris, 2007, p. 412). The power of manifestos lies not merely in their immediate impact but in their capacity to inspire and reconfigure intellectual and activist communities.

Where do we go from here?

Can we imagine something different and commit ourselves to seeking it? Will this experience shape our future decisions as researchers? We feel reinvigorated, but we do not yet know what lasting effects this process will have. Some of the most influential manifestos continue to provoke thought long after their publication – think of Marx, think of Haraway. It is of course ridiculous to compare ourselves to them, it would be a delusion of grandeur, but maybe it could convince you that the form is worth taking seriously. We hope that something of our endeavour might endure, as motivation, as a memory of something we want to change.

Writing or participating in a manifesto is not an endpoint but a beginning. We hope to spark conversations, debate, dialogue, and, most importantly, action. Can we, as media scholars, solve all that is wrong with media today? Certainly not. But we can at least react strongly to the gravest issues, think collectively about responses, and engage in acts of resistance, creation, and solidarity – both large and small.

References

- Ashby, S., Hanna, J., Matos, S., & Rodrigues, R. (2017). Words in freedom: A manifesto machine as critical design. In A. D. Cheok, M. Inami, & T. Romão (Eds.) *International conference on advances in computer entertainment* (pp. 557-566). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-76270-8_38
- Davis, L. J., & Morris, D. B. (2007). Biocultures manifesto. *New Literary History*, 38(3), 411-418. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2007.0046>
- Garforth, L. (2009). No intentions? Utopian theory after the future. *Journal for Cultural Research*, 13(1), 5-27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797580802674787>
- Hanna, J., & Ashby, S. (2022). Reflections on manifesto writing. *Multimodality & Society*, 2(1), 23-30. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26349795211072444>
- Levitas, R. (2013). *Utopia as method: The imaginary reconstitution of society*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137314253>
- Senabre Hidalgo, E., Wagener, A., Wandl-Vogt, E., & Lew, R. (2022). Manifesto sprint on biocultural diversity: An experimental approach to knowledge co-creation, discourse design and collaborative writing. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2050603>